

## Can Asymmetrical Cooperation Be Legitimised? Habermas, Foucault and Spivak on German- Tunisian Cooperation in Higher Education

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ifa Edition Culture and Foreign Policy

# Can Asymmetrical Cooperation Be Legitimised?

Habermas, Foucault and Spivak on German-Tunisian Cooperation  
in Higher Education

Mathieu Rousselin

ifa





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Mathieu Rousselin





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## Foreword

“The cult of positionality and the continuous emphasis on the various identitarian predicates of the oppressed present a powerful obstacle to the development of transnational solidarity and genuine international cooperation,” states the author Mathieu Rousselin in this study.

‘Dialogue at eye level’ or ‘partnership among equals’ – the terminology of external cultural relations and foreign educational and cultural policy suggests that cooperation is only legitimate if shielded from power relations. Does a paradigm shift exist from dialogue to cooperation? How is cooperation possible in power relations?

The author of this study, Mathieu Rousselin, investigates whether international cooperation can be legitimised even when it involves a degree of structural asymmetry among participants drawing on critical and postcolonial theories. To this end, the project reflects on the possibility of a paradigm shift from dialogue to cooperation. Cooperation requires both a linguistic-conceptual and a scientific-technical agreement on the possible causes of complex phenomena.

The project forms part of ifa's Research Programme “Culture and Foreign Policy”, in which experts address current topics related to culture and foreign policy with the aim of involving academics, practitioners, policymakers and the public. The main findings of this report were presented and discussed at an internal workshop in Duisburg at the Käte Hamburger Kolleg/Centre for Global Cooperation Research and at a public Käte Hamburger Lecture titled “Postcolonial Approaches Towards Global Cooperation” held at ifa in Stuttgart. The report benefited from the invaluable input of the participating researchers and experts.

We very much thank Mathieu Rousselin for his excellent work and commitment to this research project. Special thanks also go to our colleague Odila Triebel for her invaluable conceptual input, and to Sarah Widmaier and Isabell Scheidt for their work on the conception and editing of this project.

In light of ever more complex interdependencies, and in the knowledge that ecological, economic and social global risks can only be tackled together, cultural intelligence and knowledge about the functioning of global cooperation is indispensable. International cooperation at all levels, among different cultures within and across societies is vital if we are to face up to today's global challenges.

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Cooperation Research

## Abstract

This study investigates whether and under which conditions certain forms of cooperation that are characterised by a degree of structural asymmetry among partners may nonetheless be considered legitimate. In investigating this question, the study will operate in three theory-driven sections borrowing from critical theory, post-structuralism and post-colonialism. Each section will provide a brief presentation of the main theoretical arguments developed by one philosopher, illustrated with extensive direct quotes from relevant original works. This presentation will then be followed by a critical summary. For the sake of illustration, theoretical arguments will then be confronted with empirical observations based on my own participation in the "Tunisia in Transition" project. Section one will argue in favour of the possibility of genuinely horizontal argumentative engagement on the basis of Habermas' discourse 'ethics' and theory of communicative action. By contrast, section two will introduce Foucault's genealogical account of the power/knowledge interplay to reject the possibility of discursive spaces that would be in a position of exteriority to power relations. Section three will then bring in the writings of Spivak on the double aporia of representation in order to highlight the practical obstacles to a subversive use of the Master's knowledge by the subaltern for genuinely emancipatory purposes.



## Background information

Is genuine horizontality in bilateral and multilateral cooperation ever possible? Can there be such a thing as a non-colonialist foreign cultural and educational policy? Is there an irrepressible 'right to be different' and is every difference necessarily legitimate for the sake of pluralism? Under which circumstances and conditions can external homogenising pressure or even a peer-pressure towards conformity be legitimised?

Whether it is 'dialogue at eye level', 'cooperation on an equal footing' or 'partnership among equals' – the vocabulary of international cultural and educational policy suggests that interpersonal and interstate cooperation is legitimate if and only if it is somehow shielded from power relations. Drawing on critical theory and postcolonial studies, this research investigates whether international cooperation can be legitimised, even if it involves a degree of structural asymmetry amongst participants that results in a power advantage for one of the parties involved.

In doing so, this study will tackle the main difference between dialogue and cooperation. As evidenced by initiatives such as the 'interfaith/interreligious dialogue' or the 'dialogue between cultures', one enters into a dialogue in order to make one's position clear to the other party and concomitantly to better understand the position of the dialogue partner. Cooperation is, however, a more demanding form of social interaction in the sense that it explicitly aims to reach a common position on issues that are reportedly of joint concern (climate change, migration, terrorism). In addition to broadly overlapping interests regarding the issue at stake, cooperation requires both a linguistic-conceptual and a scientific-technical agreement on the possible causes of complex phenomena, which creates plenty of occasions for all manner of pressures, constraints and arm-twisting.

For this reason, North-South cooperation is regularly criticised by postcolonial researchers as a form of prolongation of imperial modes of interaction. Indeed, the structural asymmetry of participants may lead to situations where the more powerful cooperation partner uses their power advantage to force and impose their language, concepts, knowledge and techniques/technologies upon the weaker and possibly reluctant cooperation partner. While being aware of this possibility, this research will investigate whether asymmetric cooperation may nonetheless be legitimised if it leads to effective problem-solving and/or generates emancipatory effects. In doing so, close attention will be paid to the possibility for the weaker cooperation partner to demand and obtain rational justifications from more powerful cooperation partners and to oppose the adoption of insufficiently justified measures.

This tension will be examined on the basis of a critical and reflexive analysis of the DAAD project “Tunisia in transition”, involving collaboration between German and Tunisian universities. Even though this project rhetorically embraces cooperative partnership and mutual learning, a clear asymmetry can be detected between the German and Tunisian project partners. The project description on the website of Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München<sup>1</sup> states that this international research project has the aim of

“shaping structures in the Tunisian higher education landscape and providing an exemplary platform, in particular for Tunisian junior scientists, to work in a networked and applied manner. In addition to a research output which is both original and relevant for the Tunisian transformation process, the project will thus contribute to the modernisation of higher education structures in the humanities and social sciences.”<sup>2</sup>

To this end, methods workshops and seminars on scientific writing were offered in Tunisia.

In this context, lecturers from German universities were regularly confronted with questions concerning the universality of their scientific standards. In one instance, a fascinating discussion developed between Tunisian participants and German lecturers on the subject of determining whether the research methods presented by German lecturers were the one and only ‘proper way’ of conducting scientific enquiry. Alternatively, some Tunisian participants argued that there might exist an alternative ‘Tunisian way’ of conducting scientific enquiry, that does not necessarily meet ‘Western’ scientific standards and yet that might have equal value.

While participants in a scientific dialogue may satisfy themselves with the second perspective (existence of competing and equally valid scientific standards), scientific cooperation does, however, require that participants agree on common scientific standards, for example given the fact that the project foresees joint research and publication output. As far as the DAAD project “Tunisia in Transition” is concerned, this meant that the scientific standards of the more powerful cooperation partners (participants from German universi-

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.naher-osten.uni-muenchen.de/forschung/forsch\\_tunesien/index.html](http://www.naher-osten.uni-muenchen.de/forschung/forsch_tunesien/index.html).

<sup>2</sup> „Sie soll in der tunesischen Hochschullandschaft strukturbildend wirken und eine beispielgebende Plattform sein, in deren Rahmen insbesondere tunesische Nachwuchswissenschaftler vernetzt und anwendungsorientiert arbeiten können. Neben einer originären und für den tunesischen Transformationsprozess relevanten Forschungsleistung soll damit ein Beitrag zur Modernisierung der Hochschulstrukturen in den Geistes- und Sozialwissenschaften geleistet werden.“

ties) were left unchanged and adopted mostly unaltered by the less powerful cooperation partners (participants from Tunisian universities). In empirical terms, this offers a powerful refutation of the possibility of an authentic co-creation with open-ended outcome (*Kokreation mit Ergebnisoffenheit*).

Yet, this one-sided adoption may be legitimised if the less powerful cooperation partner has the possibility to create an obligation of justification (*Schaffung eines Rechtfertigungszwanges*) and in particular to demand rational patterns of arguments (*Einforderung von Begründungsmustern*) for the actions of the more powerful cooperation partner, while also being in a position to oppose the adoption of norms, rules and standards that are insufficiently justified (*tatsächliche Widerstandsfähigkeit*).

On the basis of self-reflection and reflexive interviews with members of the German-Tunisian research group “Tunisia in Transformation”, this empirical part of this study aims to scrutinise the legitimisation strategy of the parties involved. While highlighting the practical obstacles to genuinely Habermasian rational-argumentative modes of interaction in situations of structural asymmetry, this study reveals that legitimate cooperation requires a high degree of self-critical awareness, along with a sense of responsibility on the part of those involved.

## 1. Introduction: Dialogue, cooperation and alterity

“Respect for others’ beliefs as the highest value can mean only one of two things: either we treat the other in a patronising way and avoid hurting him in order not to ruin his illusions, or we adopt the relativist stance of multiple ‘regimes of truth’, disqualifying as violent imposition any clear insistence on truth. What, however, about submitting [the other, together with ourselves] to a respectful, but for that reason no less ruthless, critical analysis? This and only this, is the way to show true respect for [others]: to treat them as serious adults responsible for their beliefs.” (Žižek, 2009:118)

In February 2015, I was invited to teach a three-day workshop on research designs to a group of German and Tunisian doctoral students. The workshop took place as part of the DAAD research group “Tunisia in Transition” and was held at the University of Sousse in Tunisia. Given the heterogeneous disciplinary background of participants, the decision was taken in agreement with the German and Tunisian research group coordinators to focus on the basic components of deductive research designs: the definition and delimitation of a topic; formulation of a research question; identification of the academic field and screening of the relevant scientific literature; formulation of a set of falsifiable hypotheses; and definition of a hypothesis-testing strategy including data collection, data analysis and presentation/discussion of research results. This workshop was designed to provide common guidelines for the subsequent research activities of all individual German and Tunisian participants, in so far as the project planned joint publications.

### 1.1 Respect or engage?

It soon became clear that the common guidelines were not suitable for every research project. In particular, some participants were planning fairly explorative studies that called for more inductive research strategies aimed at generating hypotheses, while others had difficulties structuring their research hypotheses in terms of a causal relationship between dependent and independent variables. This led to a lively epistemological discussion in which the comparative merits and shortcomings of various modes of production of scientific knowledge were assessed and compared. In the course of this discussion, a Tunisian participant half-jokingly suggested that the research methods being debated evolved out of, and hence were only applicable to, German/European/Western social sciences but were probably not suitable for investigating empirical realities in Tunisia. Instead, he playfully asked whether there might exist an alternative, ‘Tunisian way’ of conducting social scientific research and of producing scientific knowledge that would not meet the German/European/Western standards of scientificity and yet would possess absolutely equal value and therefore deserve strictly equal consideration.

My own response was twofold. On the one hand, I felt that the critique against contemporary 'German/European/Western standards of scientificity' was actually a critique against a positivist understanding of social sciences à la King/Keohane/Verba centred on the establishment and, if doable, the quantitative measurement of relations of causation. I therefore explained how this understanding had long been challenged within Germany, Europe and the West, for instance in the course of the positivism dispute (*Positivismusstreit*) between the rationalists around Popper and the Frankfurt School around Adorno and Habermas. Rejecting 'German/European/Western social sciences' – whatever these may be – on the grounds that they are positivist is therefore committing a dual mistake: it overlooks the methodological diversity within Germany, Europe and 'the West' (there are German/European/Western non-positivists) and it ignores the fact that the fundamental epistemological dispute between positivists and anti-positivists also traverses 'non-Western' scientific communities (there are Chinese, Indian and Brazilian positivists).<sup>3</sup>

On the other hand and even though I was genuinely sympathetic with the underlying postcolonial critique of power on which the dismissal of 'German/European/Western social sciences' rested, I insisted that it is not sufficient to simply denounce the 'scientific imperialism' of the West – in parallel, the equal usefulness of 'autochthonous' scientific practices and the equal validity of the claim of alternative 'non-Western' standards of scientificity must also be rationally established.<sup>4</sup> Stated otherwise, the standard deconstructionist argument regarding the contingent and historically constructed character of

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<sup>3</sup> The difficulty is, however, that from a structural and perhaps even from a statistical perspective, the statement of the Tunisian participant is correct: large-N, standardised, causation-based research is indeed the dominant 'way of doing social sciences' in the West, a way that is taught within most academic programmes, factored in by universities in their staffing decisions as well as conveyed and further reinforced by the most influential discipline-specific journals. Yet, if one thinks in terms of power and oppression, the Tunisian participant is probably wrong in implicitly presenting the situation as a case of 'the West' oppressing 'the Rest' – non-positivist researchers in 'the West' are just as oppressed as their non-positivist colleagues in the 'non-West' and are arguably more oppressed (i.e. face greater difficulties getting published, climbing up the academic ladder, etc.) than their positivist colleagues in the 'non-Western' academic world.

<sup>4</sup> In this, I follow a friendly critique of postcolonial and cultural studies that can for instance be found in Žižek (2009) – see: "The 'radical' postcolonial critique of liberalism thus remains at the standard Marxist level of denouncing false universality, of showing how a position that presents itself as neutral-universal effectively privileges a certain (heterosexual, male, Christian) culture. [...] The question is, does this suffice to constitute a critique?" (ibid. 126) and "The standard Marxist hermeneutics of unearthing the particular bias of abstract universality should thus be supplemented by its opposite: by the properly Hegelian procedure which uncovers the universality of what presents itself as a particular position." (ibid. 131).

contemporary representations of scientificity in 'the West' does not mean that any alternative, 'non-Western' construction automatically and necessarily has an equal claim to Truth: some modes of producing knowledge are simply more fruitful than others. The usefulness of a scientific cooperation project such as "Tunisia in Transition" lies precisely in providing an arena where participants are invited to lay down and confront their standards of scientificity while concomitantly subjecting these standards to 'respectful but ruthless critical analysis', as a result of which initial statements and positions may very well be reformulated or even plainly refuted. In this context, invocations of cultural specificity are never sufficient in themselves. Rather, the discussion ought to focus on the precise reasons why a singularity challenges and possibly invalidates a model that presents itself as potentially universal: either the claim to cultural specificity cannot be rationally established and reveals itself empty, a mere instance of 'narcissism of small differences', as a result of which what presented itself as singular is revealed to be a simple configuration of the Universal; or else the claim to cultural specificity can effectively be substantiated and out of the Singular emerges a reconfiguration of the Universal, for the greater benefit of all parties involved.

### 1.2 Dialogue and cooperation

This little anecdote has another virtue: it provides a parsimonious, almost chemically pure illustration of what is the essential distinction between dialogue and cooperation. Indeed, the demand for respect towards one's difference is the cornerstone of all interfaith or intercultural dialogue initiatives: one enters into such a dialogue so as to make one's position clear to the other party and concomitantly to better understand the position of the dialogue partner. All positions are thus on a strictly equal footing and any insistence that one position may have greater value or even greater validity than any other can indeed be 'disqualified as violent imposition'. Had "Tunisia in Transition" been a scientific dialogue rather than scientific cooperation project, each 'side' would have presented its 'way of doing research' while becoming acquainted with the 'way of doing research' of the other, with the purpose of identifying commonalities and differences in the Tunisian and German practice of social science but without reflecting upon the meaning of these commonalities and differences in cultural practices for social science itself.

Cooperation is, however, a more demanding form of interaction in the sense that it explicitly aims to reach a common position on issues that are reportedly of joint concern (climate change, migration, terrorism, etc.) or, in the case of a cooperation project in higher education and scientific research, to produce a common outcome (joint conference, double-degree programme, joint funding application, co-authored publication, etc.). This in

turn requires that co-operators share a common language, common cognitive frames and common methodological instruments. In other words, in addition to a joint interest in the issue at stake or in the common outcome, cooperation requires far-reaching linguistic/conceptual and scientific/technical agreement. In practical terms, this means that international cooperation may overtly take asymmetric forms, even in cases where the overall cooperation architecture formally ensures the statutory equality of partners. As far as the project “Tunisia in Transition” is concerned, for instance, ‘international scientific cooperation’ basically meant that the scientific standards of the more powerful cooperation partner (German universities) were transferred and adopted unaltered by the less powerful cooperation partner (Tunisian universities), which does not allow us to speak of an authentic process of co-creation with open-ended outcome.

The above anecdote can also be linked with broader theoretical discussions concerning the difference between dialogue and cooperation as well as the possible existence of a paradigm shift away from a dialogical approach towards more cooperative forms of interaction at the international level. The notion of dialogue has been fruitfully imported in the disciplines of political science and international relations. For example, Guillaume (2002) proposed a dialogical conception of the process of identity construction in international relations as an amended form of constructivism in which the primary function of dialogue is to help actors negotiate the terms of the identity/alterity nexus: both self-understanding and othering are then formed and performed through dialogue. Somehow relatedly, Mendieta (2009) suggests a form of “dialogical cosmopolitanism” as an answer to the imperial, directive nature of both Kantian cosmopolitanism and indeed of the European Enlightenment project itself. Building upon debates initiated with the reception of Habermas’ work in political science, Linklater emphasised the potential of dialogical politics for peaceful conflict resolution and suggested that dialogue may be “one of the best means of advancing the civilising process in international relations” (2005: 154). Interestingly however, Linklater also acknowledges the exclusionary and disciplinary effects of dialogue and thus ends up advocating a ‘thin version’ of the dialogical principle – a theoretical move that recalls the cautious attitude of many critical and feminist scholars towards dialogue.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> See for instance Browne (2003: 1): “So often contrasted with the monological dictations of imperialism, ethnocentrism and patriarchy, dialogue, with its potential for inclusivity, representation and political transformation, has become one of the most passionately discussed topics in social and political theory. However, while dialogue is promoted by its supporters as a pluralising force capable of accommodating the moral disagreement inevitable in every sphere of human society, its promise is widely and vehemently challenged.”

The discussion on the limits of the dialogical approach and on the possibility of a paradigm shift from dialogue to cooperation may benefit from our taking a look at a seemingly unrelated issue – namely the distinction that is frequently drawn between coordination and cooperation in a number of fields, from computer science and ethology to social psychology and management research. Although there is no one agreed definition, the majority view holds that coordination is a simpler form of interaction in which agents voluntarily exchange information concerning their individual intentions and behaviours in order to avoid redundancies, share best practices or increase efficiency. Cooperation, however, usually concerns tasks that cannot be performed or completed by individual agents on their own and that therefore demand the active participation of the parties involved, acting jointly in the pursuit of the same goal, defined through common agreement. In game theoretical terms, coordination games are mutualistic: as in a stag hunt situation (Duguid et al. 2014), all parties benefit from working together, so that there is no incentive to defect. The epitome of the cooperation game is, however, the prisoner's dilemma: a situation where the parties involved must pay a price for their cooperation but may theoretically enjoy the benefit of cooperation without paying the individual price. This creates a powerful and rational incentive to defect that can be counterbalanced through various constraint mechanisms, such as the binding authority of a political ruler (Leviathan), the collective endorsement of and commitment to a set of rules that can be enforced upon the involved parties even against their will (Social Contract) and the development of religious, ethical and moral rules of conduct for cooperative behaviour (Tomasello 2009 and 2016).

### 1.3 Object and structure of this study

This study investigates whether and under which conditions forms of cooperation that are characterised by a degree of structural asymmetry among partners may nonetheless be legitimate. In other words, should a scientific cooperation project like “Tunisia in Transition” be dismissed from the outset as neo-colonial, as the unacceptable imposition of foreign templates upon a reluctant partner purely based on power considerations? Or is it possible for the project to be organised and conducted in such a way that it is legitimate, and thus acceptable to the Tunisian cooperation partners, despite the clear structural power advantage enjoyed by German universities?

In investigating these questions, the study will operate in three theory-driven sections borrowing from critical theory, post-structuralism and post-colonialism. Each section will provide a brief presentation of the main theoretical arguments developed by one philosopher, illustrated with extensive direct quotes from relevant original works. This presenta-



tion will then be followed by a critical summary. For the sake of illustration, theoretical arguments will then be confronted with empirical observations based on my own participation in the “Tunisia in Transition” project. Although this is no place to recast yet again the dispute between Foucault and Habermas (and between their respective followers),<sup>6</sup> it nevertheless seems important to offer a succinct overview of the arguments and positions of the two philosophers that directly bear on the subject of this study. Section one will therefore argue in favour of the possibility of genuinely horizontal argumentative engagement on the basis of Habermas’ discourse “ethics” and theory of communicative action. By contrast, section two will introduce Foucault’s genealogical account of the power/knowledge interplay to reject the possibility of discursive spaces that would be in a position of exteriority to power relations. Section three will then bring in the writings of Spivak on the double aporia of representation in order to highlight the practical obstacles to a subversive use of the Master’s knowledge by the subaltern for genuinely emancipatory purposes.

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<sup>6</sup> Interested readers may usefully refer to Samantha Ashenden, David Owen (eds.) (1999): *Foucault contra Habermas. Recasting the dialogue between genealogy and critical theory*. London: SAGE; Michael Kelly (ed.) (1994): *Critique and power. Recasting the Foucault/Habermas debate*. Cambridge: MIT Press; Bo Isenberg (1991): *Habermas on Foucault Critical Remarks*, in: *Acta Sociologica* 34(4): 299-308; Matthew King (2009): *Clarifying the Foucault-Habermas debate. Morality, ethics and normative foundations*, in: *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 35(3): 287-314; Amy Allen (2009): *Discourse, Power and Subjectivation: The Foucault/Habermas debate reconsidered*, in: *The Philosophical Forum, Inc* 40(1): 1-28.

## 2. Habermas' communicative action or the circumvention of power relations through rational argumentation

"Practical reason no longer resides ... in the ethical substance of a specific community, but in the rules of discourse and forms of argumentation that borrow their normative content from the validity basis of action oriented to reaching understanding." (Habermas 1996: 296-297)

In his debate with Foucault, Habermas very much set himself up as the "strongest contemporary defender of the Enlightenment faith in Reason", willingly playing the part of the "progressive intellectual who shares the conservative response to those who seem to be trashing the West's intellectual inheritance, its belief in 'truth' and in the possibility of rigorous justification for social action" (Simon 1994: 948-949). In *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (1987b), Habermas charges post-structuralists and all-out deconstructionists with logical fallacy, pointing out that their deconstruction of truth discourses in itself constitutes a discourse to be deconstructed – by conveniently excluding themselves from their deconstruction, post-structuralists thus "operate on an unsupportable meta-level" (Matthews 2012: 125). In response to Foucault's genealogical account of power/knowledge relations and of their role in the disciplining of bodies, Habermas argues for the possibility of conceptually disentangling and even practically shielding reason from power in the discursive sphere, as long as the competition for the better argument is organised on the basis of communicative rather than instrumental rationality.

In his *Theory of Communicative Action* (1984 and 1987a), Habermas describes how communication may escape the distortions and coercions introduced by pre-discursive relations of power if it occurs on the basis of a "discourse ethics" (or, to word it more clearly, a discourse theory of morality) in which participants are committed to offering reasoned arguments in support of the validity claim included in their speech acts. Such a commitment paves the way for a deliberative exchange in which non-discursive factors, such as the respective power relations between participants outside of the discursive space, may not be invoked in support of a validity claim. Accordingly, even the most powerful participant can be forced by weaker participants to offer public reasons to justify the truth of his or her utterances. So long as individuals agree to interact "through the use of speech oriented towards mutual agreement, taking yes/no positions on criticisable validity claims" (1987b: 322), at the micro level the discursive sphere functions on the basis of undistorted argumentative meritocracy. Although relationships of power do not disappear, they are circumscribed to the macro level of systems; any intrusion of power in a practical discourse thus can and should be the object of universal condemnation on moral grounds.

## 2.1 The consensus theory of truth

In his early (untranslated) work on the effect of the “linguistic turn” on truth theories, Habermas argued that the truth of propositions is never established based on sensory experiences and on the extent to which a proposition accurately describes the world (correspondence theory), because there can be no direct contact with reality without the mediation of language.<sup>7</sup> Rather, truth is asserted discursively by providing rational justification for the validity claim included in the assertive component of a statement: “the idea of truth can only be developed with reference to the discursive upholding of validity claims”.<sup>8</sup> Although Habermas never quite excludes the possibility of a universal validity (*Gültigkeit*), he clearly favours a form of contextual validity (*soziale Geltung*) that requires proving<sup>9</sup>:

“With the assertoric sense of her statement, a speaker raises a criticisable claim to the validity of the asserted preposition and because no one has direct access to uninterpreted conditions of validity, ‘validity’ [*Gültigkeit*] must be understood in epistemic terms as ‘validity proven for us’ [*Geltung*].” (Habermas, 1996: 14)

On this basis, Habermas coined his “consensus theory of truth” according to which

“I can attribute a predicate to an object if and only if everyone else who could enter into discourse with me would also attribute the same predicate to the same object. To distinguish true propositions from false ones, I take recourse to the judgement of others – that is, of all others with whom I could ever enter into discourse (including counterfactually all discursive partners whom I could encounter if my life history were coextensive with the history of human kind). The truth condition of propositions is the potential assent of all others [...] The universal-pragmatic meaning of truth, therefore, is determined in terms of the demand of reaching a rational consensus.” (Habermas 2001a[1971]: 89)

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<sup>7</sup> “We cannot confront our sentences directly with a reality that is not already permeated by language. Hence we cannot identify a class of basic propositions that are self-legitimizing and might therefore serve as the beginning and end of a linear chain of justifications.” (Habermas 2003: 249)

<sup>8</sup> My translation from the original German: „Darüber, ob Sachverhalte der Fall sind oder nicht der Fall sind, entscheidet nicht die Evidenz von Erfahrungen, sondern der Gang der Argumentationen. Die Idee der Wahrheit lässt sich nur mit Bezugnahme auf die diskursive Einlösung von Geltungsansprüchen entfalten.” (Habermas 1973: 218) To be more precise, although a truth claim may be grounded in/supported by [*fundiert*] experience, it is never justified [*begründet*] by invoking experience since “truth claims can be redeemed only through argument”. Hence, the first condition to assert the truth of a validity claim is that it does not “conflict with dissonant experience” whereas the ‘discursive redeemability’ – that is: the ability to “hold up against all counterarguments and [to] command the assent of all potential participants in a discourse” – constitutes the second condition for truth (Habermas 2001 a: 88-89).

<sup>9</sup> On this point, see Camargo 2013: 67-91 and Callinicos 2006: 26-29.

Accordingly, Habermas' post-metaphysical truth is a powerfully anti-essentialist notion: substantively speaking, there is no certain and definitive knowledge that could be used as a yardstick to assess the truth or falsehood of a discourse. Rather, truth is the fragile outcome of a formal but contingent procedure of justification, always subject to revision based on future learning processes. The consensus theory of truth has therefore been criticised insofar as it "misleadingly suggests that we take a proposition to be true because it is or can be agreed to by all those concerned, whereas in fact, we ought to agree to a proposition because it is true, not the other way around" (translator's introduction in Habermas 2003: xvi). Over time, Habermas came to distance himself from his discursive/epistemic conception of truth (whereby truth is equated with "ideal warranted assertibility") and recognised that "the language game of argumentation" never quite exhausts truth – in contrast to normative rightness, there is more to truth than mere justification.<sup>10</sup> By highlighting the need to understand how argumentative rationality crucially depends on a set of tacit beliefs operating performatively from within the lifeworld,<sup>11</sup> Habermas almost seems to call for a Foucauldian genealogy of the conditions under which warranted assertibility is produced and accepted.

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<sup>10</sup> "The truth of a proposition does not become an epistemically mediated state of affairs merely in virtue of the fact that we can determine whether its truth conditions (which we must interpret in light of the appropriate kinds of reasons in any given case) are fulfilled only by means of justification, that is, by means of discursively redeeming the corresponding truth claim. [...] Thus the discursive conception is not straightforwardly false, but insufficient. It still fails to explain what authorizes us to take as true a proposition we suppose to be ideally warranted." (Habermas 2003: 252)

<sup>11</sup> "The network of routine practices relies on more or less implicit beliefs that we take to be true against a broad background of intersubjectively shared or sufficiently overlapping beliefs. Everyday routines and habituated communication work on the basis of certainties that guide our actions. This 'knowledge' that we draw on performatively has the Platonic connotation that we are operating with 'truths'—with sentences whose truth conditions are fulfilled. As soon as such certainties are dislodged from the framework of what we take for granted in the lifeworld and are thus no longer naively accepted, they become just so many questionable assumptions. In the transition from action to discourse, what is taken to be true is the first thing to shed its mode of practical certainty and to take on instead the form of a hypothetical statement whose validity remains undetermined until it passes or fails the test of argumentation. Looking beyond the level of argumentation, we can comprehend the pragmatic role of a Janus-faced truth that establishes the desired internal connection between performative certainty and warranted assertibility." (Habermas 2003: 253)

## 2.2 The discourse theory of morality

It sometimes occurs to me that the best answer to Habermas' unwavering faith in the capacity to provide rational justification for one's validity claim might be given by a three-year old child discovering the exhilarating power of deconstruction by insisting on asking "but why?" after each answer she receives from her overwhelmed parents. To mitigate the risk of infinite regress, Habermas resorts to a distinction between ethics (*Sittlichkeit*) and morality (*Moralität*). In his clear and parsimonious account of that distinction, King (2009: 290) notices:

"what distinguishes the moral from the ethical is that the moral sphere encompasses 'procedural' or formal questions of *justice*, which admit of universal answers, whereas the ethical sphere encompasses substantive questions of *good*, the answers to which can only be relative and particular."

Stated otherwise, although they may be rationally discussed, ethical issues almost never lead to universal agreement, because they are connected with identities and cultural representations.<sup>12</sup> By contrast, Habermas' theory of justice ambitions to formulate an impartial judgement on normative claims by means of an argumentative procedure of justification bringing together participants in a practical discourse. It is on the basis of this distinction that Habermas accuses Foucault's work of the "arbitrary partisanship of a criticism that cannot account for its normative foundations" (Habermas 1987b: 276). Indeed, Foucault's genealogical method not only deconstructs ethical principles but it also "undercuts all moral bases of the sort on which any non-arbitrary political claim must rest" (King 2009: 288). In the absence of a basic procedure serving as foundational moral principle (as Habermas' discourse theory of morality), Foucault's work remains 'cryptonormative', it can never establish the validity of the normative assumptions on which its rest.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> "The fact that ethical questions are implicitly informed by the issues of identity and self-understanding may explain why they do not admit of an answer valid for everyone. But the logic of such questions does not completely exclude the possibility of rational answers in this dimension. [...] The hermeneutical clarification of one's identity also appeals to reasons; a self-referential interpretation must satisfy the precondition that it admits of assessment in terms of authenticity and inauthenticity [...] The relativization of the validity of ethical statements does not constitute a deficiency but is the result of the logic of a question directed to me (or us) alone and ultimately can be answered only by me (or by us), though authentic interpretations must, of course, be compatible with valid moral norms." (Habermas 2001b: 127)

<sup>13</sup> "Anyone who goes beyond procedural questions of a discourse theory of morality and ethics and, in a normative attitude, immediately embarks on a theory of the well-ordered, or even emancipated, society will very quickly run up against the limits of his own historical situation and his failure to take into account the context in which his own development has taken place." (Habermas 2001b: 176)

By contrast, Habermas' own unassailable normative foundation is the "discourse ethics"<sup>14</sup> or, more properly speaking, the discourse theory of morality. Kant's categorical imperative is used as a starting point to argue that only those norms that are universalisable are truly moral.<sup>15</sup> This leads Habermas to propose his condition (U) or principle of universalisation: for a norm to be valid, it is necessary that

"all affected can accept the consequences and the side effects its general observance can be anticipated to have for the satisfaction of everyone's interests (and these consequences are preferred to those of known alternative possibilities for regulation)" (Habermas 1990: 65).

Condition (U) aims at ensuring impartiality and argumentative fairness during the discursive exchange – any breaching of condition (U) implies that one position was arbitrarily favoured. Under (U), the foundational moral principle of discourse (D) becomes that "only those norms can claim to be valid that meet (or could meet) with the approval of all affected in their capacity as participants in practical discourse" (Habermas 1990: 66). In this sense, a practical discourse is merely a procedure that allows assessing the validity of norms; it does not aim at producing justified norms, which is precisely why the discourse theory of morality is not culturally limited: it rests upon "universal and necessary presuppositions of argumentation".<sup>16</sup> The negation of the requirement of procedural im-

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<sup>14</sup> The expression "discourse ethics" is a misnomer if there ever was one to the extent that it provides with a moral and not with an ethical foundation – to the extent that they only admit of contingent answers, ethical principles cannot be normatively foundational.

<sup>15</sup> "A categorical imperative that specifies that a maxim is just only if all could will that it should be adhered to by everyone in comparable situations first signals a break with the egocentric character of the golden rule ('Do not do unto others what you would not have them do unto you'). Everyone must be able to will that the maxims of our action should become a universal law. Only a maxim that can be generalized from the perspective of all affected counts as a norm that can command general assent and to that extent is worthy of recognition or, in other words, is morally binding. [...] The imperative meaning of these commands alone can be understood as an 'ought' that is dependent on neither subjective goals and preferences nor on what is for me the absolute goal of a good, successful, or not-failed life. Rather, what one 'should' or 'must' do has here the sense that to act thus is just and therefore a duty." (Habermas 2001b: 8)

<sup>16</sup> "Discourse ethics advances universalistic and thus very strong theses, but the status it claims for those theses is relatively weak. Essentially, the justification involves two steps. First, a principle of universalization (U) is introduced. It serves as a rule of argumentation in practical discourses. Second, this rule is justified in terms of the substance of the pragmatic presuppositions of argumentation as such in connection with an explication of the meaning of normative claims to validity. [...] The second step, which is designed to set forth the universal validity of (U), a validity that extends beyond the perspective of a particular culture, is based on a transcendental-pragmatic demonstration of universal and necessary presuppositions of argumentation. We may no longer burden these arguments with the status of an a

partiality amounts to my being unwilling to submit my behaviour to the validity of the arguments presented to me by other parties in the practical discourse ("Whatever you say, I will do as I want!"), which is itself clearly expresses that I am not engaged in moral argumentation.

### 2.3 The theory of communicative action

Habermas' opus magnus is a two-volume investigation into the conceptions of rationality underpinning modern sociological and critical theory. Habermas' overall endeavour can be read as a positive reappraisal of the Enlightenment heritage against the pessimism of the first generation of Frankfurt School scholars who had come to equal the project of modernisation with the development of an instrumental mode of rationality that did not impede and possibly even paved the way for the advent of totalitarian ideologies (a view advocated by Adorno and Horkheimer in their "Dialectic of Enlightenment"). To give a more balanced assessment of modernisation, Habermas aims to combine a micro-theory of social integration via communicative processes of coordination together with a macro-theory of systemic integration via economic and political processes of cooperation/competition through markets. For this, he needs a theory of rationality that holds for a variety of disciplinary and methodological approaches. He thus proposes his own discursive, practical and intersubjective ("postmetaphysical, post-Hegelian" – 1984: 2) conception whereby rationality is defined by reference to formal procedures rather than to a substantial content.<sup>17</sup> On this basis, Habermas distinguishes between two types of rationality: the goal-achieving "instrumental rationality" that aims to regulate subjects and nature, and the coordination-seeking "communicative rationality" that seeks to reach and foster mutual understanding.<sup>18</sup>

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priori transcendental deduction along the lines of Kant's critique of reason. They ground only the fact that there is no identifiable alternative to our kind of argumentation." (Habermas 1990: 116)

<sup>17</sup> "When we use the expression 'rational' we suppose that there is a close relation between rationality and knowledge. Our knowledge has a propositional structure; beliefs can be represented in the form of statements. I shall presuppose this concept of knowledge without further clarification, for rationality has less to do with the possession of knowledge than with how speaking and acting subjects acquire and use knowledge. [...] These reflections point in the direction of basing the rationality of an expression on its being susceptible of criticism and grounding: an expression satisfies the precondition for rationality if and insofar as it embodies fallible knowledge and therewith has a relation to the objective world (that is, a relation to the facts) and is open to objective judgment. A judgment can be objective if it is undertaken on the basis of a transsubjective validity claim that has the same meaning for observers and nonparticipants as it has for the acting subject itself." (Habermas 1984: 8-9)

<sup>18</sup> "If we start from the noncommunicative employment of knowledge in teleological action, we make a prior decision for the concept of cognitive-instrumental rationality that has, through empiricism, deeply marked the self-understanding of the modern era. It carries with it connotations of successful self-

Criticising Weber for his emphasis on purposive rationality, Habermas then further distinguishes between two modes of action. In the "communicative action" mode, social coordination is sought and produced through the medium of language and appeals to communicative rationality and uncoerced argumentation:<sup>19</sup> participation in a practical discourse is oriented towards mutual understanding, the transmission/renewal of cultural knowledge as well as social integration (solidarity) and allows the formation of identities. In the mode of "purposive rational action" by contrast, language is replaced by the state or Capital as steering media for social coordination, which becomes outcome-oriented rather than process-oriented, that is: geared towards strategic, success-seeking, utility-maximising action. In this context, the increasing reliance on state power and/or market logics for the discussion and adoption of collectively binding norms tends to cause a general shift away from communicative towards purposive rational action, from "understanding-oriented" towards "success-oriented" discourses in which language loses its illocutionary function (reaching understanding) in favour of its perlocutionary function (Habermas 1984: 288-295).<sup>20</sup> Much of the second volume of Habermas' theory of communicative action is dedicated to the analysis of the dire consequences of this general shift on the integrity of lifeworlds as they become increasingly secularised and rationalised.<sup>21</sup>

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maintenance made possible by informed disposition over, and intelligent adaptation to, conditions of a contingent environment. On the other hand, if we start from the communicative employment of propositional knowledge in assertions, we make a prior decision for a wider concept of rationality connected with ancient conceptions of logos. This concept of communicative rationality carries with it connotations based ultimately on the central experience of the unconstrained, unifying, consensus-bringing force of argumentative speech, in which different participants overcome their merely subjective views and, owing to the mutuality of rationally motivated conviction, assure themselves of both the unity of the objective world and the intersubjectivity of their lifeworld." (Habermas 1984: 10)

<sup>19</sup> "We use the term argumentation for that type of speech in which participants thematise contested validity claims and attempt to vindicate or criticise them through arguments. An argument contains reasons or grounds that are connected in a systematic way with the validity claim of a problematic expression. The 'strength' of an argument is measured in a given context by the soundness of the reasons; that can be seen in, among other things, whether or not an argument is able to convince the participants in a discourse, that is, to motivate them to accept the validity claim in question." (Habermas 1984: 18) See also "Participants in argumentation have to presuppose in general that the structure of their communication, by virtues of features that can be described in purely formal terms, excludes all force – whether it arises from within the process of reaching understanding itself or influences it from the outside – except the force of the better argument (and thus that it also excludes, on their part, all motives except that of a cooperative search for the truth)." (Habermas 1984: 25)

<sup>20</sup> See for instance p. 295: "Thus I count as communicative action those linguistically mediated interactions in which all participants pursue illocutionary aims, and only illocutionary aims, with their mediating acts of communication. On the other hand, I regard as linguistically mediated strategic action those interactions in which at least one of the participants wants his speech acts to produce perlocutionary effects on his opposite number."

<sup>21</sup> This is the root of the 'colonisation of the lifeworld' so vehemently denounced by Habermas for tearing off the social fabric of society. Traditional forms of life are discarded and their claims to validity undermined so that "everyday consciousness is robbed of its power to synthesise; it becomes fragment-



## 2.4 Critical summary

Although it is easy to mock the naïve faith in Reason and the utter impracticability of the discourse ethics,<sup>22</sup> both arrows largely miss the target if one considers that the primary object of Habermas' overall philosophical project is to arrive at a foundational principle of universally acceptable morality on which to pursue normatively valid critique. This he believes to have found in procedural requirements ensuring conditions of transparency and argumentative impartiality (the ideal speech situation).<sup>23</sup> This powerful principle does, however, come with a very far-reaching consequence, which is the almost inescapable character of a demand for argumentative engagement, which Habermas considers to be binding even on those who reject it and whose rejection must be argumentatively grounded.<sup>24</sup>

This being said, I consider that four objections ought to be formulated against Habermas' philosophical system. The first one is the logical consequence of his normative critique being primarily concerned with formal-procedural issues rather than with substantive-ethical ones. This means that Habermasian critique is powerless against an ethically

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ed" (1987a: 355). Interestingly, Habermas by no means considers this colonisation to be a mechanical by-product of modernisation – rather, the "cultural impoverishment of everyday communicative practice" is the result of "an elitist splitting-off of expert cultures from contexts of communicative action in daily life" whereas the "one-sided rationalisation or reification of everyday communicative practice" is itself caused by "the penetration of forms of economic and administrative rationality into areas of action that resist being converted over to the media of money and power because they are specialised in cultural transmission, social integration, and child rearing, and remain dependent on mutual understanding as a mechanism for coordinating action." (1987a: 330)

<sup>22</sup> A temptation to which Foucault gave in towards the end of his life: "There is always something which causes me a problem [in what Habermas is doing]. It is when he assigns a very important place to relations of communication and also a function that I would call 'utopian'. The thought that there could be a state of communication which would be such that the games of truth could circulate freely, without obstacles, without constraints and without coercive effects seems to me to be Utopia. It is being blind to the fact that relations of power are not something bad in themselves, from which one must free one's self. I don't believe there can be a society without relations of power, if you understand them as means by which individuals try to conduct, to determine the behaviour of others." (Foucault, 1988: 129)

<sup>23</sup> For a full-fledged presentation, see "Discourse Ethics: Notes on a Program of Philosophical Justification" in Habermas 1990: 43-115. Habermas provides a more succinct account in "Justification and Application" 2001b: 56: "in rational discourse, where the speaker seeks to convince his audience through the force of the better argument, we presuppose a dialogical situation that satisfies ideal conditions in a number of respects, including, as we have seen, freedom of access, equal rights to participate, truthfulness on the part of participants, absence of coercion in taking positions, and so forth."

<sup>24</sup> "The binding effect of illocutionary forces comes about, ironically, through the fact that participants can say 'no' to speech-act offers. The critical character of this saying 'no' distinguishes taking a position in this way from a reaction based solely on caprice. A hearer can be 'bound' by speech-act offers because he is not permitted arbitrarily to refuse them but only to say 'no' to them, that is, to reject them for reasons." (Habermas 1987: 73-74)

condemnable decision that would meet condition (U) and be reached deliberatively. This is particularly true if the affected party does not possess the faculty of articulating its concerns argumentatively (mentally disabled) or is deprived of the faculty to use language altogether to articulate their concerns, as are non-humans (from sentient animals to forests and seas).<sup>25</sup>

The second and third objections relate to Habermas' overwhelmingly negative understanding of power as the great corrupting force that disrupts lifeworlds and impedes communicative action. On the one hand, in his efforts to keep power at bay and circumscribe it to the sole systemic sphere, Habermas focuses exclusively on forces of material coercion that prevent individuals from physically participating in a practical discourse (the state via its monopoly on force and Capital via the uneven distribution of resources). What Habermas neglects in this respect are forces of immaterial coercion such as particular "regimes of truth" or specific "economies of truth discourses" as a result of which some arguments are more likely to become accepted as "the better argument" than others.<sup>26</sup> On the other hand and more fundamentally, Habermas' entire philosophical edifice rests on the strict and clean conceptual distinction he establishes between the sphere of power and that of rational communication. Nevertheless, this distinction begs the question of the power advantage – and, indeed, of the violence<sup>27</sup> – that might arise even under the conditions of an ideal speech situation, for instance when participants in a practical discourse are not equally fluent in the language in which the argumentation takes place, when particular forms of symbolic domination are enshrined in the language, or when one participant is able, possibly with the consent of other participants, to erect its conceptual apparatus and terminology as the linguistic basis for argumentation.

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<sup>25</sup> This recognition can be the starting point of a renewed enquiry into actorness and thingness which challenges the conceptual dichotomies on which Habermasian thought is constructed – see for instance: "What is an 'actor'? Any element which bends space around itself, makes other elements dependent upon itself and translates their will into a language of its own." (Callon and Latour 1981: 286) This recasting of actorness that firmly rejects the modernist nature/culture and fact/value distinctions ultimately led Latour to propose a "parliament of things" (1993) and a *Dingpolitik* or "object-oriented democracy" (2005). Interestingly however, the moral foundation for Latour's Actor-Network Theory remains fairly close (and even makes explicit reference) to Habermasian discourse ethics, one however that would be extended to non-humans: "no one, as Habermas says so eloquently, can be brought to apply the results of a decision if he has not participated in the discussion that led to that discussion." (2004: 171)

<sup>26</sup> Foucault "Il faut défendre la société", Michel Foucault, éd. Gallimard Le Seuil, coll. Hautes Etudes, 1997: 22 and "Truth and Power", in Foucault, Power/Knowledge, pp. 109–33 (131–33).

<sup>27</sup> For a discussion of the violence of language, see Žižek 2009: 49–62.

## 2.5 Bearing on the case

The theory of communicative action offers a systematic answer to the critique raised by the Tunisian participant mentioned at the beginning of this study and, more generally, a fairly optimistic outlook on the possibility of legitimate cooperation in asymmetric settings. In empirical terms, however, several features do not allow "Tunisia in Transition" to be considered as a genuinely Habermasian project.

For starters, the set of formal-procedural requirements (especially the conditions of eligibility, language and format of the application) that de facto govern the submission of funding proposals led to a situation where the responsibility for the formulation of strategic objectives for the cooperation project clearly lay with the German partner, with only very minor involvement on the Tunisian side. In its distinct one-sidedness, the project's mission statement on the website of the Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München offers an unmistakable telltale sign that German universities constitute the normative reference point and that the overall objective of the cooperation enterprise is to bring Tunisian universities closer to their German counterparts. The binational research group aims at

"building and shaping structures in the Tunisian higher education landscape and at providing an exemplary platform in particular for Tunisian junior scientists to work in a networked and applied manner. In addition to a research output which is both original and relevant for the Tunisian transformation process, the project will thus contribute to the modernisation of higher education structures in the humanities and social sciences"<sup>28</sup> (my translation)

In strictly Habermasian terms, this would still be agreeable if a demand for justification could be empirically detected and if, as a result, it could be demonstrated that the Tunisian partners were in a position to obtain rational explanations, open to critical discussion and refutation, for the strategic objectives defined. From what my involvement in the project allows me to judge, such an argumentative legitimisation did not take place. I am not aware of any demand for justification emanating from Tunisian universities re-

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<sup>28</sup> *Die interdisziplinäre deutsch-tunesische Forschungsgruppe „Tunesien im Wandel“ „soll in der tunesischen Hochschullandschaft strukturbildend wirken und eine beispielgebende Plattform sein, in deren Rahmen insbesondere tunesische Nachwuchswissenschaftler vernetzt und anwendungsorientiert arbeiten können. Neben einer originären und für den tunesischen Transformationsprozess relevanten Forschungsleistung soll damit ein Beitrag zur Modernisierung der Hochschulstrukturen in den Geistes- und Sozialwissenschaften geleistet werden.“* Available at: [http://www.naher-osten.uni-muenchen.de/forschung/forsch\\_tunesien/index.html](http://www.naher-osten.uni-muenchen.de/forschung/forsch_tunesien/index.html).

garding why the overall project set certain objectives rather than others. It is, however, possible that the Tunisian universities refrained from such demands at an early stage of the cooperation process (identification of local project partners) in order to avoid appearing unprofessional, mean-spirited or uncooperative and not compromise their future involvement in the project.

As a matter of fact, I can think of only two situations over the course of the entire cooperation project (three years) in which a clear demand for justification emanated from the Tunisian cooperation partners. In one instance, Tunisian professors expressed their discontent with the selection procedure for Tunisian participants: while the German partners were seeking a meritocratic process based on an open and inclusive call for applications in which participants would be selected for several years, the Tunisian professors were keen to retain their power to appoint Tunisian participants on a yearly basis and disapproved of a procedure that they felt undermined their authority. In a second case, the Tunisian professors criticised the fact that research activities (including participation in conferences and opportunities for publication) were made available to doctoral and postdoctoral students but not to them. Although Tunisian professors did have the opportunity to voice their concerns in cooperation meetings, both demands were somehow casually dismissed by the German partners (and by me) as mere issues of political control and resource allocation. Consequently, these demands were met with rather procedural, legalistic answers: rather than engaging in extensive rational argumentation over the role of postgraduate students and junior faculty members [*Mittelbau*], the German side merely invoked donor priorities and obligations stemming from the overall cooperation framework. On the one hand, this legalistic approach was factually correct and timesaving; it also seemed more respectful than the other course of action – explaining the reasons why strengthening the autonomy of Tunisian postgraduates and postdoctorals was normatively desirable to the German partners – which might have antagonised the Tunisian side and jeopardised the project altogether. On the other hand, the lack of genuine argumentative engagement on both occasions, though it perhaps enabled the continuation of the project in the short run, acted as a demotivating factor that brought about the progressive withdrawal of the Tunisian professors. With a few exceptions, the latter increasingly assumed the role of polite but fundamentally indifferent observers. From this perspective, both of their unmet demands for justification can be seen as lost legitimisation opportunities that impeded the development of a sense of co-ownership and that will most likely undermine the medium and long-term effects of the cooperation enterprise.

The more we move away from the strategic level (objective-setting) and towards the 'tactical' level (general organisation of joint workshops, planning of joint research activities, definition of publication themes), the more the project seemingly becomes Habermasian. This is particularly true at the level of project coordinators, where interaction repeatedly occurs on the basis of argumentative reason, with one side making a proposition together with reasoned statements and asking the other side to take a position and amend the initial proposition. Whether in personal meetings or email exchanges, the working procedure is fairly inclusive and consensual, with all parties being allowed and able to take a stance on the matters discussed. In this context, the arguments presented by the Tunisian project coordinators receive full attention and often decisively influence the outcome of the discursive process, as was for instance the case with the decision to keep the same group of participants rather than rotate on a yearly basis, or the decision to publish articles as chapters in an edited volume rather than as isolated working papers. The German project coordinators appear more pro-active and more self-assertive: the initial proposition that is put to discussion usually lies with them, whereas the Tunisian project coordinators are in a more reactive position. It is however difficult to determine whether this results from personal characters and considerations of seniority (the two German project coordinators have been involved in the project as participants before taking over as coordinators) or from more structural reasons.

Lastly, as far as the more 'operational' level is concerned (concrete organisation of workshops, including the selection of speakers and of precise research methods to be presented, definition of theoretical and analytical categories, stylistic conventions for joint publications), distinctive power asymmetries tend to reappear and the project again moves away from Habermasian communicative action. Two examples can be invoked here, both to illustrate the extent to which relations of power did indeed permeate the day-to-day implementation of the project and to document the efforts that were made to remain within the boundaries of argumentative rationality.

The first example relates to the adoption of what at first sight seems to be purely stylistic conventions for joint research activities. In one case, a heated debate arose among Tunisian participants regarding the appropriate qualification of the Tunisian political party Ennahdha (Islamic versus Islamist). After the Tunisian participants presented their arguments and counter-arguments on the matter, a few German participants dispassionately suggested the need to 'stick with international practices', which brought the debate to an end. After a brief screening of the scientific literature, project coordinators then proposed to call the party 'Islamic', which 'pragmatically' became the common rule. Although this little episode may seem almost as anecdotal as the one mentioned at the begin-

ning of this study, it is also problematic (and emblematic) in several ways. First, the validity of the claim "we need to stick with international practices in this matter" certainly requires substantiation, both in general terms (by specifying under which conditions complying with international standards is advisable and under which conditions it becomes acceptable to depart from these standards), and in more specific terms (by determining whether the conditions for departing from international standards are met in the case at hand) – from a Habermasian perspective, the existence of a majority supporting one particular argumentative position does not imply that it has the most powerful argument. The better argument is measured by the ability to withstand critical scrutiny, not by the number of followers. Second, not only are there very cogent reasons to call Ennahdha an Islamist party, as I do in my own writings, but in the end the decision on what to call Ennahdha is ultimately an ethical one (in the Habermasian sense). It is therefore not possible to argue that one spelling (Islamic) is neutral, objective and value-free whereas the other spelling is political, subjective and value-laden – both spellings are equally ideological. Third, the seemingly pragmatic solution found is nothing more than a call for external 'experts' to settle an internal question in such a way that participants in the research group are deprived of the possibility of critically assessing the validity claim included in the experts' judgement – i.e. it is an instance of 'colonisation of the lifeworld'.

Relatedly, participants in the research group were required, both in the author's guidelines for joint publications and on the occasion of a workshop on scientific writing, to use an impersonal style, that banishes adjectives and avoids making personal judgments. As explained to me by one of the German project coordinators, the background for this requirement was that a number of Tunisian students had an "overly militant approach" and had decided to study social sciences "in order to change/transform things, not to understand" [*um etwas zu bewegen, nicht um zu verstehen*], which that project coordinator felt was not the purpose of the discipline. Although this requirement basically deprives much of social theory of any scientific significance, it was not challenged by Tunisian or German participants during the workshop and, therefore, those who held this peculiar view were not required to present arguments in support of their contestable claims. To the extent that these guidelines were part of the criteria on the basis of which reviewers decided whether participants' contributions were fit for publication in the edited volume, one can thus say that project coordinators relied on vertical power to ensure compliance. From the perspective of communicative rationality, not only is this situation regrettable for Tunisian and German participants in the research group (who were exposed to unsubstantiated validity claims), but it is also a missed opportunity for the workshop speakers

## 2. Habermas' communicative action or the circumvention of power relations through rational argumentation

and organisers who could have been brought through critical questioning and rational argumentation to understand the narrow-mindedness of their initial discursive position.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Luckily enough, I can testify that Tunisian and German participants alike largely ignored this piece of requirement and that they made good use of adjectives and of (substantiated) personal judgements in their written contributions to the research group.

### 3. Foucault's genealogy or the impossibility of locating truth outside of power formations

"Power cannot be exercised unless a certain economy of discourses of truth functions in, on the basis of, and thanks to, that power. [...] We are obliged to produce the truth by the power that demands truth and needs it in order to function: we are forced to tell the truth, we are constrained, we are condemned to admit the truth or to discover it. Power constantly asks questions and questions us; it constantly investigates and records; it institutionalizes the search for the truth, professionalizes it, and rewards it. [...] In a different sense, we are also subject to the truth in the sense that truth lays down the law: it is the discourse of truth that decides, at least in part; it conveys and propels truth-effects. After all, we are judged, condemned, forced to perform tasks, and destined to live and die in certain ways by discourses that are true, and which bring with them specific power-effects. So: rules of right, mechanisms of power, truth-effects." (Foucault 2003: 24-25)

For Foucault, and subsequently most poststructuralist researchers, there can exist no communicative space located outside of power formations and working on the basis of pure argumentative meritocracy. This, however, does not mean that communication is or equals power:<sup>30</sup> rather, communication is necessarily penetrated by power because even the 'flattest' and most horizontal discursive situation can never quite eliminate or offset the prior verticality of power relations – starting with the recognition that "we are already before the very least of our words, governed and paralysed by language" (Foucault 2005[1966]: 325). Ultimately, critique itself is therefore a form of power: first, the critical discourse takes place within specific, contextual relations of power between communicators, to which it cannot be external; second, even the critical discourse on power is a 'mode of action upon actions' that aims at producing certain 'effects of power' such as bringing people to question the legitimacy of modes of domination that present themselves as necessary; third, the critical discourse, as soon as it seeks to articulate a true

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<sup>30</sup> See for instance: "It is necessary also to distinguish power relations from relationships of communication which transmit information by means of a language, a system of signs, or any other symbolic medium. [...] Power relations, relationships of communication, and objective capacities should not therefore be confused. [...] This is not to say that there is a question of three separate domains. It is a question of three types of relationships which in fact always overlap one another, support one another reciprocally, and use each other mutually as means to an end. [...] Relationships of communication imply finalized activities (even if only the correct putting into operation of elements of meaning) and, by virtue of modifying the field of information between partners, produce effects of power." (Foucault 1982: 786-787)



discourse on what power is and how it operates, is itself crucially dependent on an economy of truth discourses that is intertwined with power.

At the core of the Foucault-Habermas dispute there is therefore a conceptual disagreement on the nature of power. For Habermas, power is a great corrupting force that colonises lifeworlds as well as a steering medium that leads to forms of coordination. Power is thus morally condemnable on the grounds that it bypasses participative, understanding-oriented and consensus-based communication. For Foucault, however, a society free from power relations is necessarily an abstraction – and a rather undesirable abstraction at that, since power does not merely discipline bodies and minds but also constitutes subjects,<sup>31</sup> including resisting subjects.<sup>32</sup> Yet, rather than leading him to some form of relativism (“there is always power, no configuration is better than another”) or of fatalism

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<sup>31</sup> “It is a form of power which makes individuals subjects. There are two meanings of the word ‘subject’: subject to someone else by control and dependence; and tied to his own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge. Both meanings suggest a form of power which subjugates and makes subject to.” (Foucault 1982: 781) See also “It is therefore, I think, a mistake to think of the individual as a sort of elementary nucleus, a primitive atom or some multiple, inert matter to which power is applied, or which is struck by a power that subordinates or destroys individuals. In actual fact, one of the first effects of power is that it allows bodies, gestures, discourses, and desires to be identified and constituted as something individual. The individual is not, in other words, power's opposite number; the individual is one of power's first effects. The individual is in fact a power-effect, and at the same time, and to the extent that he is a power-effect, the individual is a relay: power passes through the individuals it has constituted.” (Foucault 2003: 29-30)

<sup>32</sup> “The omnipresence of power: not because it has the privilege of consolidating everything under its invincible unity, but because it is produced from one moment to the next, at every point, or rather in every relation from one point to another. Power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere. [...] Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power. [...]. The existence [of power relationships] depends on a multiplicity of points of resistance: these play the role of adversary, target, support, or handle in power relations. These points of resistance are present everywhere in the power network. Hence there is no single locus of great Refusal, no soul of revolt, source of all rebellions, or pure law of the revolutionary. Instead there is a plurality of resistances, each of them a special case [...] But this does not mean that they are only a reaction or rebound, forming with respect to the basic domination an underside that is in the end always passive, doomed to perpetual defeat. Resistances [...] are the odd term in relations of power; they are inscribed in the latter as an irreducible opposite. [...] Are there no great radical ruptures, massive binary divisions, then? Occasionally, yes. But more often one is dealing with mobile and transitory points of resistance, producing cleavages in a society that shift about, fracturing unities and effecting regroupings, furrowing across individuals themselves, cutting them up and remolding them, marking off irreducible regions in them, in their bodies and minds. Just as the network of power relations ends by forming a dense web that passes through apparatuses and institutions, without being exactly localized in them, so too the swarm of points of resistance traverses social stratifications and individual unities. And it is doubtless the strategic codification of these points of resistance that makes a revolution possible, somewhat similar to the way in which the state relies on the institutional integration of power relationships.” (Foucault 1990[1976]: 93-96)

("domination is part of life, nothing can be changed"), Foucault's recognition of the omnipresence of power relations marks the beginning of an ethical critique aimed at "the analysis of power relations in a given society, their historical formation, the source of their strength or fragility, the conditions which are necessary to transform some or to abolish others" (Foucault 1982: 791). The late Foucauldian critique of power relations is thus a fundamentally emancipatory activity, seeking to foster the development of a practice of insight and of enlightened freedom.

#### 3.1 Critique as genealogy

Although he never indulged his readers with a practicable definition, Foucauldian genealogy is perhaps best illustrated as a method of critical enquiry in a 1977 text on "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History" (re-published in Rabinow 1984: 76-100). There Foucault mocks those engaging in a "quest for origins" on the grounds that they end up both essentialising and legitimising contingent, accidental states of affairs.<sup>33</sup> By contrast, the genealogical approach emphasises the vicissitudes of history, "the details and accidents that accompany every beginning" (1984: 80). But more importantly, the genealogist's task is to patiently document the mechanisms of exclusion that necessarily accompany the emergence of a historical truth, the silencing of dissident voices: "What is found at the historical beginning of things is not the inviolable identity of their origin; it is the dissension of other things. It is disparity" (1984: 79). Genealogy thus offers a powerful remedy against self-infatuation as well as fixed (exclusive) identity constructions<sup>34</sup> and reveals that any

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<sup>33</sup> "[The pursuit of origin] is an attempt to capture the exact essence of things, their purest possibilities, and their carefully protected identities; because this search assumes the existence of immobile forms that precede the external world of accident and succession. This search is directed to 'that which was already there,' the image of a primordial truth fully adequate to its nature, and it necessitates the removal of every mask to ultimately disclose an original identity. However, if the genealogist refuses to extend his faith in metaphysics, if he listens to history, he finds that there is 'something altogether different' behind things: not a timeless and essential secret, but the secret that they have no essence or that their essence was fabricated in a piecemeal fashion from alien forms." (Foucault in Rabinow 1984: 78)

<sup>34</sup> "Where the soul pretends unification or the self fabricates a coherent identity, the genealogist sets out to study the beginning – numberless beginnings, whose faint traces and hints of color are readily seen by a historical eye. The analysis of descent permits the dissociation of the self, its recognition and displacement as an empty synthesis, in liberating a profusion of lost events. An examination of descent also permits the discovery, under the unique aspect of a trait or a concept, of the myriad events through which – thanks to which, against which – they were formed. Genealogy does not pretend to go back in time to restore an unbroken continuity that operates beyond the dispersion of forgotten things; its duty is not to demonstrate that the past actively exists in the present, that it continues secretly to animate the present, having imposed a predetermined form on all its vicissitudes. [...] To follow the complex course of descent is to maintain passing events in their proper dispersion; it is to identify the accidents,

inheritance is indeed "an unstable assemblage of faults, fissures, and heterogeneous layers that threaten the fragile inheritor from within or from underneath" (1984: 81). Tracing a genealogical account is thus a liberating, emancipatory endeavour insofar as it frees us from the fiction of historical necessity by tracing the fortuitous character of processes that governed developments in ideas (birth of new technologies of power that seek disciplining bodies) and institutions (emergence of prisons as the preferred means for criminal punishment). The critical use of history liberates subjects "by presenting [them] with other origins than those in which [they] prefer to see [themselves]" (1984: 96). By outlining the contingency of what formations of power present as fixed and necessary, genealogy is thus the first step towards an 'ethics of the self' in which subjects are able to earn their autonomy by de-centring themselves – that is, by practising subjectivation through desubjugation.<sup>35</sup>

The linkage that Foucault establishes between the process of autonomisation vis-à-vis power formations and the need for a critical, painstaking historicisation of phenomena that present themselves to us as universal and universally valid ultimately means that the genealogical method must be turned against modernity itself, understood as a particular regime of truth based on rationality and objectivity. Subjugation also operates by means of a regime of truth that demands claims to knowledge to be validated with reference to specific scientific procedures: genuine emancipation therefore requires interrogating the successive historical forms of scientific consciousness. This is the point where Foucault and Habermas diverge most evidently. To Foucault, Habermas' demand for an unassailable normative foundation of critique amounts to a form of blackmail that prevents any serious enquiry into the historical emergence of specific forms of rationality.<sup>36</sup> To this

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the minute deviations – or conversely, the complete reversals – the errors, the false appraisals, and the faulty calculations that gave birth to those things that continue to exist and have value for us; it is to discover that truth or being does not lie at the root of what we know and what we are, but the exteriority of accidents." (Foucault in Rabinow 1984: 81)

<sup>35</sup> "And if governmentalization is indeed this movement through which individuals are subjugated in the reality of a social practice through mechanisms of power that adhere to a truth, well, then! I will say that critique is the movement by which the subject gives himself the right to question truth on its effects of power and question power on its discourses of truth. Well, then! Critique will be the art of voluntary insubordination, that of reflected intractability. Critique would essentially insure the desubjugation of the subject in the context of what we could call, in a word, the politics of truth." (Foucault 2007: 47)

<sup>36</sup> See Foucault's interview "Critical theory/intellectual history" in Kelly (1994: 118): "I think that the blackmail which has very often been at work in every critique of reason or every critical inquiry into the history of rationality (either you accept rationality or you fall prey to the irrational) operates as though a rational critique of rationality were impossible, or as though a rational history of all the ramifications and all the bifurcations, a contingent history of reason, were impossible." By contrast Foucault offers "isolating the form of rationality presented as dominant, and endowed with the status of the one-and-only reason, in order to show that it is only one possible form among others."

demand, Foucault (1984: 95) answers "that all knowledge rests upon injustice (that there is no right, not even in the act of knowing, to truth or a foundation for truth)" and warns against writing up a docile history that "finds its support outside of time and pretends to base its judgements on an apocalyptic objectivity [...] because of its belief in eternal truth" (1984: 87). Any historical account of modernity thus ought to evidence the genealogy of rationality itself, the conditions of birth of the modern faith in reason and its non-linear deployment in the scientific method.<sup>37</sup> Such a genealogical account of rationality eventually leads to the recognition of the subjective, perspectival and contextual character of knowledge – the rhetorical invocation of such universals as scientific objectivity or undisputable facticity merely hides the "singular malice" of the subject pursuing his will to knowledge. Along this line of reasoning, Habermas' demand for normative foundations does not even require a substantive response – instead, it can itself be subjected to genealogical scrutiny.<sup>38</sup>

### 3.2 The battle for truth

Foucault makes a dual contribution to epistemological debates. First, he affirms that all knowledge is rooted, localised, almost positional. In parallel, he dismisses the belief in a transcendental, universal truth that would reveal itself under exactly the same traits to all rational agents. Against this belief, he offers a genealogical account of the production of scientific knowledge with the aim of showing that all claims to rational, scientific truth function in a particular "regime of truth" or "economy of truth discourses" that is historically specific, open to revision and revolution (paradigm changes) and that sets norms by virtue of which certain discourses are socially accepted as true and others rejected as false.<sup>39</sup> Building upon this idea, Foucault's second contribution is the idea of a fundamental linkage between formations of power and the setting of norms and procedures governing the production of truth discourses. Although it is at the core of his *oeuvre* through the

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<sup>37</sup> "Examining the history of reason, he learns that it was born in an altogether 'reasonable' fashion-from chance; devotion to truth and the precision of scientific methods arose from the passion of scholars, their reciprocal hatred, their fanatical and unending discussions, and their spirit of competition-the personal conflicts that slowly forged the weapons of reason." (Foucault in Rabinow 1984: 78)

<sup>38</sup> Although Foucault's death prevented him from doing so, this is the path taken by Foucauldians such as Brown (1998) or Tully (1999).

<sup>39</sup> "It is a question of what governs statements, and the way in which they govern each other so as to constitute a set of propositions which are scientifically acceptable, and hence capable of being verified or falsified by scientific procedures. In short, there is a problem of the regime, the politics of the scientific statement. At this level it's not so much a matter of knowing what external power imposes itself on science, as of what effects of power circulate among scientific statements, what constitutes, as it were, their internal regime of power, and how and why at certain moments that regime undergoes a global modification." (Foucault in Gordon 1980: 112-113)

concept of power/knowledge, Foucault does not seem to have held definitive views on the nature of this relationship between power and truth – in fact, it has been convincingly argued (King 2009: 304-305) that the question of truth is one of the key features distinguishing Foucault's genealogical and ethical periods.

Indeed, some of Foucault's statements suggest that power and truth are bound in a fairly unidirectional relationship, with formations of power essentially defining what counts as true.<sup>40</sup> If these statements are to be taken literally, not only is there no universal truth but any invocation of truth in a statement ought to be regarded as an act of power. Yet there are in my opinion good reasons to argue that Foucault's view on the matter is not as causally linear and one-sided as sometimes portrayed. For instance, Foucault also considered that intellectuals were engaged in a "battle for truth or around truth" which is at its core "a battle about the status of truth and the economic and political role it plays" (Foucault in Gordon 1980: 132). In a way that is consistent with Habermas' distinction between morality and ethics, Foucault considers that this battle for truth is not of a substantive nature (to define what is true) but of a procedural nature, with the aim of adopting "a system of ordered procedures for the production, regulation, distribution, circulation and operation of statements" (ibid. 133). Far from his nihilistic or relativistic caricature ("if all truth is power, then anything goes and no one statement is ever truer than any other"), Foucault thus considers that the battle for truth is worth being fought because not all regimes of truth are equal in value and in usefulness. From a normative (Habermas would say ethical) point of view, some regimes of truth are more valuable to the extent that they "allow these games of power to be played with a minimum of domination" (Foucault 1988: 129) – in other words, certain economies of truth discourses produce stronger disciplinary effects, whereas others leave more space for individual freedoms and the kind of "techniques of the self" that allow desubjugation and self-transformation.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> "The important thing here, I believe, is that truth isn't outside power, or lacking in power: contrary to a myth whose history and functions would repay further study, truth isn't the reward of free spirits, the child of protracted solitude, nor the privilege of those who have succeeded in liberating themselves. Truth is a thing of this world: it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint. And it induces regular effects of power. Each society has its regime of truth, its 'general politics' of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true." (Foucault in Gordon 1980: 131)

<sup>41</sup> "The essential political problem for the intellectual is not to criticise the ideological contents supposedly linked to science, or to ensure that his own scientific practice is accompanied by a correct ideology, but that of ascertaining the possibility of constituting a new politics of truth. The problem is not chang-

### 3.3 The insurrection of subjugated knowledges

Echoing his acerbic critique of Marxism in "The Order of Things",<sup>42</sup> Foucault's charge against general social theories seeking to understand social relations as a totality is two-fold:<sup>43</sup> first, such theories (understood as Marxism and psychoanalysis) have had inhibiting and hindering effects on social research; second, they did not lead to emancipation, since the main societal advances in the sixties and seventies (against sexual morals and traditional hierarchies, and against psychiatric institutions) were the product of a form of "discontinuous, particular and local critique" that allows "an autonomous, non-centralised kind of theoretical production, [...] whose validity is not dependent on the approval of the established regimes of thought" (Foucault in Gordon 1980: 81). In lieu of general theories, local critique should thus aim at the "insurrection of subjugated knowl-

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ing people's consciousnesses – or what's in their heads – but the political, economic, institutional regime of the production of truth. It's not a matter of emancipating truth from every system of power (which would be a chimera, for truth is already power) but of detaching the power of truth from the forms of hegemony, social, economic and cultural, within which it operates at the present time." (Foucault in Gordon 1980: 133)

<sup>42</sup> See "At the deepest level of Western knowledge, Marxism introduced no real discontinuity; it found its place without difficulty, as a full, quiet, comfortable and, goodness knows, satisfying form for a time (its own), within an epistemological arrangement that welcomed it gladly (since it was this arrangement that was in fact making room for it) and that it, in return, had no intention of disturbing and, above all, no power to modify, even one jot, since it rested entirely upon it. Marxism exists in nineteenth-century thought like a fish in water: that is, it is unable to breathe anywhere else. Though it is in opposition to the 'bourgeois' theories of economics, and though this opposition leads it to use the project of a radical reversal of History as a weapon against them, that conflict and that project nevertheless have as their condition of possibility, not the reworking of all History, but an event that any archaeology can situate with precision, and that prescribed simultaneously, and according to the same mode, both nineteenth-century bourgeois economics and nineteenth-century revolutionary economics. Their controversies may have stirred up a few waves and caused a few surface ripples; but they are no more than storms in a children's paddling pool." (2005[1966]: 260-261)

<sup>43</sup> See for instance his lecture from January 7<sup>th</sup>, 1976 reproduced in Gordon (1980: 80-81): "I would say, then, that what has emerged in the course of the last ten or fifteen years is a sense of the increasing vulnerability to criticism of things, institutions, practices, discourses. A certain fragility has been discovered in the very bedrock of existence-even, and perhaps above all, in those aspects of it that are most familiar, most solid and most intimately related to our bodies and to our everyday behaviour. But together with this sense of instability and this amazing efficacy of discontinuous, particular and local criticism, one in fact also discovers something that perhaps was not initially foreseen, something one might describe as precisely the inhibiting effect of global, totalitarian theories. It is not that these global theories have not provided nor continue to provide in a fairly consistent fashion useful tools for local research: Marxism and psychoanalysis are proofs of this. But I believe these tools have only been provided on the condition that the theoretical unity of these discourses was in some sense put in abeyance, or at least curtailed, divided, overthrown, caricatured, theatricalised, or what you will. In each case, the attempt to think in terms of a totality has in fact proved a hindrance to research. So, the main point to be gleaned from these events of the last fifteen years, their predominant feature, is the local character of criticism."

edges" (ibid., 81-86), that is to say paying closer attention firstly to the wealth of empirical material that has evaded theorising or even openly contradicts established theories ("historical contents that have been buried and disguised in a functionalist coherence or formal systemisation") and, secondly, to naïve, popular, low-level forms of knowledge based on everyday practices and commonsense that have been discarded and disqualified by formations of power as insufficiently scientific.<sup>44</sup>

To Foucault, effective critique at the local level takes the form of a union between these two rejected and discredited strands. This union-association of the versed erudite and the ordinary man is facilitated by their sharing a common history of relegation and marginalisation through scientific knowledge<sup>45</sup> – the purpose of this union-association is thus the genealogical production of an anti-science that

"entertain[s] the claims to attention of local, discontinuous, disqualified, illegitimate knowledges against the claims of a unitary body of theory which would filter, hierarchise and order them in the name of some true knowledge and some arbitrary idea of what constitutes a science and its objects" (ibid. 83).

Crucially, Foucault makes it very clear that the anti-scientific character of the genealogical method does not amount to a rejection of the scientific method as a means of enquiry.<sup>46</sup> Rather, genealogy evidences the different effects of power that a discourse carries

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<sup>44</sup> "On the other hand, I believe that by subjugated knowledges one should understand [...] a whole set of knowledges that have been disqualified as inadequate to their task or insufficiently elaborated: naïve knowledges, located low down on the hierarchy, beneath the required level of cognition or scientificity. I also believe that it is through the re-emergence of these low-ranking knowledges, these unqualified, even directly disqualified knowledges (such as that of the psychiatric patient, of the ill person, of the nurse, of the doctor-parallel and marginal as they are to the knowledge of medicine- that of the delinquent etc.), and which involve what I would call a popular knowledge (*le savoir des gens*) though it is far from being a general commonsense knowledge, but is on the contrary a particular, local, regional knowledge, a differential knowledge incapable of unanimity and which owes its force only to the harshness with which it is opposed by everything surrounding it- that it is through the re-appearance of this knowledge, of these local popular knowledges, these disqualified knowledges, that criticism performs its work." (ibid. 82)

<sup>45</sup> "In the two cases – in the case of the erudite as in that of the disqualified knowledges – with what in fact were these buried, subjugated knowledges really concerned? They were concerned with a historical knowledge of struggles. In the specialised areas of erudition as in the disqualified, popular knowledge there lay the memory of hostile encounters which even up to this day have been confined to the margins of knowledge." (ibid. 83)

<sup>46</sup> This, incidentally, is an idea that dates back at least to 1969 with the publication of "The Archaeology of Knowledge" where Foucault half-jokingly remarked that "if the critical style is one of studied casualness, then the genealogical mood is one of felicitous positivism." (Foucault 1972[1969]: 234)

when it bears the label 'scientific' and when it does not.<sup>47</sup> But in strictly procedural terms, the anti-scientific knowledge is opened to the same kind of argumentative refutation as discourses deemed scientific by formations of power – in other words, even anti-science requires a dedicated and disciplined commitment to the “gray, meticulous, and patiently documentary” method of genealogy (Foucault in Rabinow 1984: 76). Thus Foucault may mockingly call out his opponents:

“Has there been, from the time when anti-psychiatry or the genealogy of psychiatric institutions were launched – and it is now a good fifteen years ago – a single Marxist, or a single psychiatrist, who has gone over the same ground in his own terms and shown that these genealogies that we produced were false, inadequately elaborated, poorly articulated and ill-founded?” (Foucault in Gordon 1980: 86-87)

#### 3.4 Critical summary

Despite its originality and undeniable aesthetic appeal to all but the most positivistically educated readers, Foucault's philosophy is often disconcerting and discontinuous, in such a way that can only frustrate the reader in search of a systematic account of social phenomena, where terms and concepts are neatly disambiguated, precisely defined and carefully brought into relation. With Foucault, the form mirrors and reinforces the message: in lieu of superb analytical work, what Foucault's texts have to offer is a confused feeling of uneasiness, which the reader is responsible for investigating self-critically in a kind of genealogy of her or himself. Through this process, Foucault's hope is that the reader's initial question “what is it in this text that makes me feel uneasy and uncomfortable?” will be redefined as “why did I come to think that a text must respect certain formal rules?” and eventually as “but wait a minute, who produced these rules? When and how were they adopted? And do I actually think that these rules are necessary and desirable?”. For now, let us dare to assume that the problem lies less with the experience that Foucault seeks to generate than with what readers of Foucault do with this experience. Using the

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<sup>47</sup> This is why the efforts that certain discourses, such as Marxism, undertake in order to establish themselves as being 'scientific', have to be read as a quest for the kind of recognition, legitimacy and effects of power that usually accompany scientific discourses: “When I see you straining to establish the scientificity of Marxism I do not really think that you are demonstrating once and for all that Marxism has a rational structure and that therefore its propositions are the outcome of verifiable procedures; for me you are doing something altogether different, 'you are investing Marxist discourses and those who uphold them with the effects of a power which the West since Medieval times has attributed to science and has reserved for those engaged in scientific discourse.” (ibid. 85)



opening pages of Nietzsche's *Zarathustra*,<sup>48</sup> I would distinguish between three readings of Foucault.

The camel's reading of Foucault is one of miserable, but also hedonistic, resignation. If power is always everywhere, permeating all social relations – including rational discourses based on communicative action, but also critical discourses presenting themselves as potential counter-powers, if there is no escaping the normalising effects of biopower in disciplinary societies, then genuine emancipation is impossible and Habermas (1987b: 284) is right in asking "why fight at all? Why is struggle preferable to submission? Why ought domination to be resisted?". There the camel reveals itself double-faced: to some, the realisation that there is no definitive reason to resist domination will come as a heavy burden and a cause for depression – these are the sad camels, like those social workers discovering in Foucault their personal responsibility in the perpetuation and reinforcement of disciplinary mechanisms; but to others, the same realisation will be erected as the ultimate revolutionary strategy in postmodern times, where power ought not to be resisted since it is that very resistance that feeds and sustains power relations – these are the joyful camels enjoying life and occupying spaces.<sup>49</sup>

The lion's reading of Foucault is deeply nihilist and relativist. If truth and knowledge are simple outcomes in a game of power by means of which formations of power are able

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<sup>48</sup> In these pages, Nietzsche describes the three spiritual transformations (or metamorphoses) that the soul must undergo to reach maturity. These transformations are metaphorically represented by a camel, then a lion and finally a child. The spiritual journey starts with the camel, a zealed beast of burden that delights in obeying instructions and takes great pride in carrying heavy burdens. When it is tired of merely doing as it is told, the soul turns into a fierce lion that violently opposes all restrictions placed upon its own freedom, including restrictions stemming from religious injunctions or social traditions. Yet, the fierce lion may only negate and destruct. With the third transformation, the soul becomes playful, creative and child-like: it is finally able to develop its own sense of morality.

<sup>49</sup> This was the core of Baudrillard's sharp criticism in "Forget Foucault" (1977), where he argued that Foucault's theory of power analysed all social relations on the basis of a war analogy, thereby defining power but also resistance through the exclusive lens of conflictuality. What Foucault neglected, according to Baudrillard, is power's crucial dependence on active participation, whether positive/supportive or negative/critical, of the social body – in the end, frontal revolutionary tactics (protests, demonstrations, etc.) provide new energies that can be used and turned around by formations of power. The most effective emancipation strategy is thus to stand still, to withdraw and demobilise forces, so as not to feed power formations. The idea of "resistance by non-resistance" was also picked up and elaborated upon by Derrida (1996: 37-38). Finally, Melville's character of Bartleby (a calm, dedicated and hard-working scrivener who suddenly starts meeting all injunctions of his hierarchy with a laconic 'I would prefer not to') has been an endless source of inspiration to philosophers such as Deleuze (1993: 89-114), Derrida (1999: 106), Agamben (1998: 48 and 1999: 243-271), Hardt/Negri (2000: 203-204) and, perhaps more surprisingly, Žižek (2006: 381-385 and, indirectly, 2009: 183) and even Badiou (2006: 422). For a discussion of the role of Bartleby in French philosophy, see Berkman (2011).

to discipline the social body, then, to start with, all claims to universal truth and to scientific knowledge ought to be genealogically “deconstructed” (to use a non-Foucauldian term) to lay bare the will to power that hides at their core. In addition, there is no means to rationally arbitrate between competing claims to truth – because rationality is the product of a specific and contingent genealogy and because truth is fundamentally perspectival and claims to truth are assessed on the basis of the “regime of truth” of which they are part. The insurrection of subjugated knowledges is thus necessary to liberate discourses that have been unduly discredited by formations of power that use scientific knowledge solely to ensure social control. Brought to its logical conclusion, this line of reasoning implies that all competing discourses have an equal claim to truth, all are different but equally valid perspectives on the same issue; in consequence, any attempt (even consensual) to introduce a truth hierarchy between these claims can be rejected as an insupportable discrimination. Similarly, formations of power tend to rely on normalisation techniques to govern minds and bodies. A particular domain is erected as a scientific discipline to encourage investigations by scientists and researchers, who then mobilise a number of statistical instruments (medical surveys, screening programmes, health tests) to measure and assess the frequency of certain health conditions or the respective importance of various sexual practices. After turning the body into an object of scientific knowledge, the normal/Gaussian distribution is used to define a standard norm of physical/mental health or of appropriate sexual behaviour that has powerful disciplinary effects, given the very strong epistemic and institutional pressure towards conformity for individuals at the margins (homosexuals, mentally handicapped, prisoners). Seeking lordship over its own desert, the Foucauldian lion is primarily concerned with desubjugation, with the removal of anything standing in its way, and thus feels entitled to “assert the right to be different” (Foucault 1982: 781), to reject any homogenising constraint, any pressure towards social conformity and, instead, to violently affirm his or her singularity.

The child's reading of Foucault emphasises ethical personal growth, it is concerned with caring self-transformation rather than violent self-assertion and desubjugation. Here, Foucault's genealogical anti-science remains procedurally scientific, opened to rational argumentation and refutation (it is not “a sceptical or relativistic refusal of all verified truth” – *ibid.*) but challenges the privileges of knowledge (it is “an opposition to the effects of power which are linked with knowledge, competence, and qualification” – *ibid.*). Subjectivity and truth remain closely connected, but the stake of the games of truth is no longer the legitimisation of coercive practices by formations of power; rather, it is the ascetic and voluntary self-transformation of the subject that seeks to control itself instead of being

controlled by formations of power.<sup>50</sup> In this process, knowledge and truth are not mere subjugating instruments of power, as the lion would have it – they condition and govern subjectivation.<sup>51</sup> But truth requires an effort and a disciplined commitment: in the words of O'Sullivan (2010: 52) "access to truth must involve a prior preparation by the subject who is then, in turn, transformed by that very truth". For Foucault, this is where philosophy meets spirituality. Spirituality (the transformation of the self through love/illumination or through asceticism/discipline) is the price to pay for the philosophical quest for truth.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> See for instance: "does the expression 'let us liberate our sexuality'; have a meaning? Isn't the problem rather to try to decide the practices of freedom through which we could determine what is sexual pleasure and what are our erotic, loving, passionate relationships with others? It seems to me that to use this ethical problem of the definition of practices of freedom is more important than the affirmation (and repetitious, at that) that sexuality or desire must be set free [...] liberation is sometimes the political or historical condition for a practice of liberty. Take for example sexuality. It is certain that a number of liberations regarding the power of the male were needed, that it was necessary to free one's self from an oppressive morality which concerns heterosexuality as well as homosexuality. This liberation does not manifest a contented being, replete with a sexuality wherein the subject would have attained a complete and satisfying relationship. Liberation opens up new relationships of power, which have to be controlled by practices of liberty. [...] Liberty is the ontological condition of ethics." (Foucault 1988: 114-115)

<sup>51</sup> "One cannot care for self without knowledge. The care for self is of course knowledge of self – that is the Socratic-Platonic aspect – but it is also the knowledge of a certain number of rules of conduct or of principles which are at the same time truths and regulations. To care for self is to fit one's self out with these truths. That is where ethics is linked to the game of truth." (Foucault 1988: 116)

<sup>52</sup> Here is Foucault's wonderful discussion of philosophy and spirituality in his lecture of 6 January 1982 (reproduced in Foucault 2005: 15-16): "We will call, if you like, 'philosophy' the form of thought that asks, not of course what is true and what is false, but what determines that there is and can be truth and falsehood and that one can or cannot separate the true and the false. We will call 'philosophy' the form of thought that asks what it is that allows the subject to have access to the truth and which attempts to determine the conditions and limits of the subject's access to the truth. If we call this 'philosophy', then I think we could call 'spirituality' the pursuit, practice, and experience through which the subject carries out the necessary transformations on himself in order to have access to the truth. We will call 'spirituality' the set of these pursuits, practices, and experiences, which may be purifications, ascetic exercises, renunciations, conversions of looking, modifications of existence, etcetera, which are not for knowledge but for the subject, for the subject's very being, the price to be paid for access to the truth. [...] Spirituality postulates that the truth is never given to the subject by right. Spirituality postulates that the subject as such does not have right of access to the truth and is not capable of having access to the truth. It postulates that the truth is not given to the subject by a simple act of knowledge (*connaissance*) [...] It postulates that for the subject to have right of access to the truth he must be changed, transformed, shifted, and become, to some extent and up to a certain point, other than himself. The truth is only given to the subject at a price that brings the subject's being into play. For as he is, the subject is not capable of truth. [...] It follows that from this point of view there can be no truth without a conversion or a transformation of the subject. This conversion, this transformation of the subject [...] may take place in the form of a movement that removes the subject from his current status and condition (either an ascending movement of the subject himself, or else a movement by which the truth comes to him and enlightens him). Again, quite conventionally, let us call this movement, in either of its directions, the movement of *eros* (love). Another major form through which the subject can and must transform himself in order to have access to the truth is a kind of work. This is a work of the self on

### 3.5 Bearing on the case

At first sight, Foucault seems to be grist to the mill of the Tunisian participant rejecting German/European/Western social sciences *en bloc*. Nonetheless, I want to show in the brief discussion that follows that this is to a large extent misleading and that Foucault (who himself taught at the University of Tunis for almost three years) cannot be invoked in support of the view that any mode of social interaction that is characterised by power asymmetries is per se illegitimate, whether in a classroom or in the framework of a scientific cooperation project.

With its three basic components (genealogy, power/knowledge and local critique), the Foucauldian toolkit is certainly fit for postcolonial critique, where it has been repeatedly employed. Using the genealogical method, the Tunisian participant in the research group "Tunisia in Transition" may, for instance, easily have argued that the erection of positivist methods in social sciences was historically grounded and by no means necessary. By contrast, he could have invoked the existence of subjugated methodological knowledges indigenous to Tunisia, these being of these "naïve knowledges, located low down on the hierarchy, beneath the required level of cognition or scientificity" championed by Foucault. Finally, he could have described the process by which they were brought into disrepute, "disqualified as inadequate to their task or insufficiently elaborated" as a mere effect of power.

In fact, I believe none of these three positions as they stand is truly Foucauldian. To start with, all three rhetorical positions remain empty assertions as long as they are not firmly established through the "gray, meticulous, and patiently documentary" work of the genealogist, digging up archives, unearthing testimonies, comparing historical sources and crossing references. Even in the framework of Foucault's anti-science, controversial assertions and polemical statements are not placed at the same discursive level as sober,

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the self, an elaboration of the self by the self, a progressive transformation of the self by the self for which one takes responsibility in a long labor of ascesis (askesis). [...] Finally, spirituality postulates that once access to the truth has really been opened up, it produces [...] effects which I will call 'rebound' ('de retour'), effects of the truth on the subject. For spirituality, the truth is not just what is given to the subject, as reward for the act of knowledge as it were, and to fulfill the act of knowledge. The truth enlightens the subject; the truth gives beatitude to the subject; the truth gives the subject tranquility of the soul. In short, in the truth and in access to the truth, there is something that fulfills the subject himself, which fulfills or transfigures his very being. In short, I think we can say that in and of itself an act of knowledge could never give access to the truth unless it was prepared, accompanied, doubled, and completed by a certain transformation of the subject; not of the individual, but of the subject himself in his being as subject."

stringent and well-grounded argumentation.<sup>53</sup> For instance, if one wants to insist on the historical construction of contemporary forms of scientificity and on the succession of historical accidents and contingencies that led an entire generation of seminar lecturers to believe that scientific knowledge is knowledge only by virtue of complying with the canon of positivism, then one needs to enter into a kind of argumentation similar to that of Foucault in his depiction of the "Cartesian moment" which saw memory and meditation being replaced as prime forms of reflexivity by methods (see Foucault's lectures on "The Hermeneutics of the Subject" in 1981-82). Such a genealogical endeavour into Western standards of scientificity would reveal the existence of countless points of resistance in 'the West' to positivism and to its methodological claims. On this basis, positivist methods would thus need to be qualified as 'one of the ways' of doing social science in the West (and elsewhere) rather than as 'the way', though I suspect it could easily be shown that these positivist methods are also the dominant way – that is: the way that is considered most serious, most scientific; the way that commands the most respect and carries the most prestige; and also the way that opens up positions of power on the academic field. That such positivist methods were one way among others of conducting research in social science was made very clear on numerous occasions in the framework of the "Tunisia in Transition" cooperation project – as a matter of fact, additional seminars were organised

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<sup>53</sup> This hierarchy between types of argumentative strategies is for instance very clear in one of Foucault's last interviews in 1984 (reproduced in Rabinow 1997: 111-112) – "I like discussions, and when I am asked questions, I try to answer them. It's true that I don't like to get involved in polemics. If I open a book and see that the author is accusing an adversary of 'infantile leftism', I shut it again right away. That's not my way of doing things; I don't belong to the world of people who do things that way. I insist on this difference as something essential: a whole morality is at stake, the morality that concerns the search for the truth and the relation to the other. In the serious play of questions and answers, in the work of reciprocal elucidation, the rights of each person are in some sense immanent in the discussion. They depend only on the dialogue situation. The person asking the questions is merely exercising the right that has been given him: to remain unconvinced, to perceive a contradiction, to require more information, to emphasize different postulates, to point out faulty reasoning, and so on. As for the person answering the questions, he too exercises a right that does not go beyond the discussion itself; by the logic of his own discourse, he is tied to what he has said earlier, and by the acceptance of dialogue he is tied to the questioning of the other. Questions and answers depend on a game-a game that is at once pleasant and difficult-in which each of the two partners takes pains to use only the rights given him by the other and by the accepted form of the dialogue. The polemicist, on the other hand, proceeds encased in privileges that he possesses in advance and will never agree to question. On principle, he possesses rights authorizing him to wage war and making that struggle a just undertaking; the person he confronts is not a partner in the search for the truth but an adversary, an enemy who is wrong, who is harmful, and whose very existence constitutes a threat. For him, then, the game consists not of recognizing this person as a subject having the right to speak but of abolishing him, as interlocutor, from any possible dialogue; and his final objective will be not to come as close as possible to a difficult truth but to bring about the triumph of the just cause he has been manifestly upholding from the beginning. The polemicist relies on a legitimacy that his adversary is by definition denied."

on alternative, non-positivist research methods (in particular hermeneutical and ethnographical methods).

Similarly, invoking the existence of local subjugated knowledges in the form of a 'Tunisian way of doing social sciences' can only be a first step towards their effective insurrection. In order to ascertain the right to be methodologically different, the second step would require the mobilisation of a vast amount of empirical contents generated through immense erudition, which would uncontrovertibly demonstrate the existence, somewhere in the academic shadow, of an entire body of knowledge, patiently constituted, and yet ignored and untapped. Let me be very plain: I am very confident that this reservoir of erudite knowledge exists in Tunisia, most likely in the form of personal testimonies of mine workers in Gafsa, individual testimonies and collective memories of struggle by employees in the branch of tourism, meticulous accounts of daily life in call centres, stories and pictures of students participating in social movements. Trained historians probably have a partial and very incomplete access to this rich body of knowledge, which has been generated by political activists, trade unionists, social workers and retired miners through countless discussions, personal involvement, direct experience, reflected distance.

Now let us suppose that our Tunisian participant were to lead the insurrection of these subjugated knowledges: how would he go about it? Although I do not preclude the possibility of altogether different methodologies, my guess is that he would most likely meet and conduct interviews with the custodians of these repressed knowledges; alternatively, he could simply talk to them in less formal ways than interviews, in ways closer to a conversation, so as not to intimidate them but rather empower them; he could consult local archives and minutes of trade-union meetings; he could visit their homes and watch private pictures of events; he could take time to get to know these people and learn to put their individual stories in a biographical and historical context. He would then need to organise this knowledge in some way, according to formats, to recurring themes, to a chronology, to regions, to the type of actors involved, to his own perceptions. Finally, he would gather his newly gained knowledge in a written form (book, article, blog), in a visual form (pictures, photo-book, exhibition), in an interactive electronic form (website, social networks), in an audio form (oral testimony, radio account), or in an audio-visual form (documentary film). Now, would there be anything properly 'Tunisian' about these various ways of organising the insurrection of subjugated knowledges? I believe nothing at all. These are different techniques for collecting, analysing and presenting information and data, which is the very object of methodology. Invoking specific cultural features ('Tunisian-ness') so as not to look, for instance, into Bourdieu's solutions to the very same

methodological problems in his *"La Misère du Monde"* – a book where specific interview techniques are developed to tap into the subjugated knowledges of housekeepers, unemployed people, immigrants, low-wage workers, children from large families, and drug addicts – would not be a creative desubjugation from Western imperial power/knowledge, but indeed would be utterly stupid.<sup>54</sup>

As far as the legitimacy of asymmetric cooperative settings is concerned, I also believe that Foucault cannot be used without certain caveats. For starters, Foucault repeatedly stated that power-free social interaction is a chimera, at least according to his definition of power as 'action upon an action'. This means that the mere existence of power asymmetries is not sufficient ground to delegitimise an entire cooperation project. In addition and contrary to Habermas, Foucault tells us that "relations of power are not something bad in themselves, from which one must free one's self". This, however, does not mean that anything goes. Foucault's interview on "the ethic of care for the self and the practice of freedom" (1988: 129) gives us two guiding principles for good cooperative practices: first, "not to dissolve [relations of power] in the utopia of a perfectly transparent communication" and, second, the necessity to "give one's self the rules of law, the techniques of management, and also the ethics, the ethos, the practice of self, which would allow these games of power to be played with a minimum of domination". The "utopia of transparency" criticised in the first principle could also be extended to include the "fiction of horizontality" in a way that would ban a number of empty but also insincere expressions from the vocabulary of foreign cultural policy ('equal footing', 'eye level', 'level playing field'). The first rule that we can give ourselves is thus to acknowledge the presence of power relations – only then will we be able to devise rules for cooperative practices that "allow these games of power to be played with a minimum of domination". Among these rules, the most important is probably freedom (which, in Foucault's words, is "the ontological condition of ethics") including the freedom to refuse to cooperate.

Finally, Foucault's well-known aphorism "Where there is power, there is resistance" implies that, despite clear power asymmetries between cooperation partners, the Tunisian

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<sup>54</sup> One can refer here to the way Bourdieu addresses a crowd of social workers criticising sociologists for being 'too theoretical' and 'too far from the empirical realities of the suburb' in the beautiful documentary film by Pierre Carles, *"La sociologie est un sport de combat"* (2001). Bourdieu explains that social workers are correct to criticise researchers who act as a "form of symbolic police" and sociologists whose work only "legitimizes mechanisms of social domination" and continues with this warning "but do not let your indignation, which is legitimate and absolutely justified, blind you and thus deprive you from instruments of knowledge. [...] If you refuse to read books [such as *"La Double Absence"* from Abdelmalek Sayad, on the grounds that they are too intellectual] you are cretins!".

side was never deprived of its agency; neither can it be described merely in terms of being a passive recipient. As far as "Tunisia in Transition" is concerned, I can think of three modes of resistance available to Tunisian partners throughout the cooperation project: first, power can be resisted by demanding rational justification that is open to argumentative contradiction (though we have already seen that this power was insufficiently used); second, power can be resisted if one cooperation partner employs the Bartleby tactics of polite withdrawal and non-engagement (adopted by some Tunisian professors when they felt that the cooperation project usurped their prerogatives); third, power can be resisted by bringing counter-powers into play. For the entire duration of "Tunisia in Transition", Tunisian professors were also engaged in other scientific cooperation projects with French and Italian universities, but also with American and increasingly with Arab universities. Even though I did not witness any situation where this third strategy was employed, such a diversified portfolio of cooperation projects would in theory have allowed Tunisian universities to balance out an unfavourable, asymmetrical environment in the event of major disagreement with their German partners.



#### 4. Intermezzo: Keeping score in the Foucault/Habermas dispute

Habermas' "Philosophical Discourse of Modernity" provides the most thorough critique of postmodern assumptions and theories that I have yet encountered. In view of its potentially devastating effects on postmodernism, the book would deserve a systematic treatment, but its impressive breadth vastly exceeds what is possible to discuss in the framework of this short study. Therefore, rather than seeking to settle the dispute once and for all, this short section aims to keep score on a very specific issue raised by Habermas regarding Foucault's work: self-referentiality.

This point of contention is perhaps expressed in its simplest form in the ninth lecture of *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* where Habermas (1990: 257) notes that "Foucault exposes himself to palpable objections, because his historiography, despite its antiscientific tenor, seeks to proceed both eruditely and positivistically". In so doing, Foucault's work faces "the methodological paradox of a science that writes the history of the human sciences with the goal of a radical critique of reason" (ibid. 248). This self-referentiality is the Habermasian version of Foucault's 'blackmail' regarding the alleged impossibility of conducting a rational critique of rationality. In a nutshell, Habermas argues that the genealogist's position is not external to the sphere of discourses it seeks to submit to genealogy – the truth claims of the genealogist ought to be subjected to the same procedures as the truth claims of the discourses of power that the genealogist investigates. Who then is to conduct the genealogy of genealogy?

"From this perspective, not only are truth claims confined to the discourses within which they arise; they exhaust their entire significance in the functional contribution they make to the self-maintenance of a given totality of discourse. On the other hand, this basic assumption of the theory of power is self-referential; if it is correct, it must destroy the foundations of the research inspired by it as well." (ibid. 279)

The only escape route Habermas leaves open to Foucault is that his work is not amenable to reason at all and we thus need to "change the frame of reference and no longer treat the same discourse as philosophy or science, but as a piece of literature" (ibid. 337).

I believe this criticism was best addressed by Foucault in an interview from 1980 (reproduced in Faubion 2000: 243-244), in which he entertained the possibility of

"a book that functions as an experience, for its author and reader alike, much more than as the establishment of a historical truth. For one to be able to have that experience through the book, what it says and does needs to be true in terms of academic,

historically verifiable truth. It can't exactly be a novel. [...] [The] book makes use of true documents but in such a way that through them it is possible not only to arrive at an establishment of truth, but also to experience something that permits a change, a transformation of the relationship we have with ourselves and with the world."

If we add Foucault's statement concerning the morality of the search for the truth ("In the serious play of questions and answers, in the work of reciprocal elucidation, the rights of each person are in some sense immanent in the discussion"), I think it is safe to consider, as does for instance King (2009), that the late Foucault practically endorses the Habermasian discourse ethics. Only he does so with the hope of generating the kind of 'effects of power' that are usually associated with scientific discourses so as to bring his reader to ponder upon the exclusionary effects of the regime of truth of which he is a part. At best, Habermas can argue that, if Foucault follows the argumentative rules of communicative reason, the Foucauldian discourse then articulates a universal truth claim that truth claims are not universal. To which Foucault might himself reply that Habermas' claim that truth claims are and must be universal is the product of a set of contingent historical conditions. Together with Kelly (1994: 365-400), I would thus conclude on the impossibility of determining with certainty whether historical validity claims may have transhistorical significance<sup>55</sup> – and reluctantly call it a draw.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> "The status of universals is thus a fundamental issue between Foucault and Habermas [...] And it will certainly remain a major difference between their respective paradigms of critique, because the issue itself stems from the self-referentiality of modern critique: Must the general principles introduced *within* modernity as normative criteria of modernity have significance that extends *beyond* modernity?" (Kelly 1994: 390-391)

<sup>56</sup> I say 'reluctantly', because on this particular point, I am more sympathetic towards Habermas' theory of communicative action, which provides an effective though inelegant solution to the self-referentiality conundrum. By rendering truth intersubjective and reason communicational in power-free discursive spaces, Habermas is able to do away with a subject-centred conception of reason that leads straight to self-referential critique. It thus becomes possible to formulate a critique with universal validity. Of course, Foucault's all-pervading power concept means that communicative action becomes just another game of power, controlled by formations of power via the production of subjectivity (the regimes of truth). Universal critique is impossible if formations of power control the conditions of validity of discourses.

## 5. Spivak's aporia of representation or the need for a productive undoing of the Enlightenment

„The narrow epistemic violence of imperialism gives us an imperfect allegory of the general violence that is the possibility of an episteme. Within the effaced itinerary of the subaltern subject, the track of sexual difference is doubly effaced. The question is not of female participation in insurgency, or the ground rules of the sexual division of labour, for both of which there is 'evidence'. It is, rather, that both as object of colonialist historiography and as subject of insurgency, the ideological construction of gender keeps the male dominant.“ (Spivak 1994: 82)

„In the ferocious thrust to be 'global', the humanities and the qualitative social sciences, 'comparative' at their best, are no longer a moving epistemological force. They will increasingly be like the opera, serving a peripheral function in society. As to whether they will draw as much corporate funding as opera – whose glamour the curricular humanities and social sciences cannot hope to match – remains to be seen. Already it is the relatively glamorous think tanks and monolingual 'interdisciplinarity' (read shrinking diversity and Americanised monoculture) that are gaining funding. U.S. 'core curricula' – minimally 'politically correct' by including 'multicultural' classics – again in English translation – are travelling internationally.“ (Spivak 2012: 25-26)

After confronting the respective arguments of moderns (as expressed by Habermas) and of post-moderns (as expressed by Foucault) on the possibility of a critical discourse of power that is itself freed from power, we now add a third perspective by referring to the work of the Marxist, deconstructionist, feminist and postcolonial scholar Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Hers is probably the most devastating critique of the possibility of organising international cooperation in such a way that it does not replicate colonial patterns of political domination, economic oppression and cultural erasure. This is because, on the one hand, the 'subalterns' are constituted as a homogeneous group through the epistemic violence of formations of power (including the best intentioned of critical scholars) operating from the outside. On the other hand, this group is then requested to express its voice using the conceptual-linguistic apparatus of the dominant, thereby resulting in a situation where the 'subalterns' are ultimately dependent upon Western intellectuals to speak for them rather than being allowed to truly speak for themselves.

## 5.1 Ideological production and representation of the subject

In her celebrated essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?", Spivak argues that the entire academic edifice of critique remains desperately Western, "the result of an interested desire to conserve the subject of the West, or the West as Subject" (Spivak 1994[1988]: 66). On the basis of a discussion of Deleuze and Foucault<sup>57</sup> (whose work she effectively accuses of helping to "consolidate the international division of labour" – *ibid.* 69) as well as of Derrida (whom she considers "less dangerous when understood than the first-world intellectual masquerading as the absent nonrepresenter who lets the oppressed speak for themselves" – *ibid.* 87), Spivak calls upon Althusser to argue for the need to integrate ideology in the theory of the subject<sup>58</sup>, so as to account for "subject formations that micrologically and often erratically operate the interests that congeal the macrologies". (*ibid.* 74) This allows her to develop a critique of the double conceptual meaning of representation<sup>59</sup>: political representation or *Vertretung* as the act of 'speaking in the name of' within political and legal institutions; and symbolic representation or *Darstellung* whereby a subject constitutes itself and the world, creates meaning through linguistic, theoretical or conceptual constructions. This distinction is essential to Spivak as "running them together, especially in order to say that beyond both is where oppressed subjects speak, act and know *for themselves*, leads to an essentialist, utopian politics" (*ibid.* 71). In contrast, what is needed

<sup>57</sup> Spivak's attack is directed at the view presented by Deleuze in a conversation with Foucault, which requires reading if her critique is to make sense. See in particular: "A theorising intellectual, for us, is no longer a subject, a representing or representative consciousness. Those who act and struggle are no longer represented, either by a group or a union that appropriates the right to stand as their conscience. Who speaks and acts? It is always a multiplicity, even within the person who speaks and acts. All of us are 'groupuscules'. Representation no longer exists; there's only action-theoretical action and practical action which serve as relays and form networks."

<sup>58</sup> This will also be Žižek's argument in "The Sublime Object of Ideology". Obviously, ideology is not to be understood here in the commonsensical way as a "veil" or as a "pair of glass" that obstructs, blurs or distorts our otherwise direct relationship to the world. Rather, the word is used to refer to as a collection of conscious and unconscious beliefs that frame individual expectations, judgements and actions. From this perspective, ideologies are both unavoidable and enabling features of the social world: there never be an ideology-free world, otherwise individuals would not be able to create meaning and relate to the world.

<sup>59</sup> "Two senses of representation are being run together: representation as 'speaking for', as in politics, and representation as 're-presentation', as in art or philosophy. Since theory is also only 'action', the theoretician does not represent (speak for) the oppressed group. Indeed, the subject is not seen as a representative consciousness (one re-presenting reality adequately) [...]. Are those who act and struggle mute, as opposed to those who act and speak? These immense problems are buried in the differences between the 'same' words: consciousness and conscience (both conscience in French), representation and re-presentation. The critique of ideological subject-constitution within state formations and systems of political economy can now be effaced, as can the active theoretical practice and 'transformation of consciousness'. The banality of leftist intellectuals' lists of self-knowing, politically canny subalterns stands revealed; representing them, the intellectuals represent themselves as transparent" (1994: 70).

is a theory of subject formation that acknowledges the performative character of linguistic-conceptual representations and its effects on political agency – that is, a theory that analyses “how the staging of the world in representation – its scene of writing, its *Darstellung* – dissimulates the choice of and need for ‘heroes’, paternal proxies, agents of power – *Vertretung*” (ibid. 74).

Another grievance Spivak has against Foucault and Deleuze is their universalisation of the individual subject, both as re-presentational Subject (the entity that is constituted by formations of power and traversed by flows of desire) and representational subject (the political body of the oppressed). By invoking such totalising concepts as Power and Desire, both philosophers thus theorise their own transparency in a theoretical construction regarded as a mere “report on the nonrepresented subject”: theory becomes a simple, transparent and undistorted relay of practices. Both Deleuze and Foucault therefore suggest that the subaltern can know and speak for itself – but through a theoretical construction they, Foucault and Deleuze, themselves operated. This universalisation of the subject is strictly rejected by Spivak on the grounds that

“this S/subject [...] belongs to the exploiters’ side of the international division of labour. It is impossible for contemporary French intellectuals to imagine the kind of Power and Desire that would inhabit the unnamed subject of the Other of Europe” (ibid. 75) – “the Other as Subject is inaccessible to Foucault and Deleuze” (ibid. 78).

In other words, critique as exercised by postmodern, male, Western philosophers ends up, at best unwillingly, reproducing and legitimising the very processes of othering it theoretically denounces.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> “It is not only that everything they read, critical or uncritical, is caught within the debate of the production of that Other, supporting or critiquing the constitution of the Subject as Europe. It is also that, in the constitution of that Other of Europe, great care was taken to obliterate the textual ingredients with which such a subject could cathect, could occupy (invest?) its itinerary – not only by ideological and scientific production, but also by the institution of the law. However reductionistic an economic analysis might seem, the French intellectuals forget at their peril that this entire overdetermined enterprise was in the interest of a dynamic economic situation requiring that interests, motives (desires) and power (of knowledge) be ruthlessly dislocated. To invoke that dislocation now as a radical discovery that should make us diagnose the economic (conditions of existence that separate out ‘classes’ descriptively) as a piece of dated analytic machinery may well be to continue the work of that dislocation and unwittingly to help in securing ‘a new balance of hegemonic relations’.” (ibid. 75)

## 5.2 White men are saving brown women from brown men

To illustrate her argument, Spivak analyses the discourse by which the British Empire forbade the practice of *sati* (ritual suicide/sacrifice of widows) in India. Invoking its moral responsibility as “the establisher of the good society”, the coloniser acted out of the belief that it espoused the cause of vulnerable women caught in the outdated, barbaric and discriminatory religious prescription of self-immolation. In doing so, the coloniser not only oversaw the extent to which this prescription was in fact an “ideological battleground” linked with domestic considerations of matrimonial strategies, property inheritance and population control. More importantly, this imposed reading also transformed Indian women in objects deserving benevolent protection:

“white men, seeking to save brown women from brown men, impose upon those women a greater ideological constriction by absolutely identifying, within discursive practice, good-wifeness with self-immolation on the husband’s pyre” (ibid. 101).

With this exemplary illustration, Spivak’s point is not to criticise the evolution of the legal system that eventually led to the ban on *sati* (an evolution she welcomes). Rather, she is pointing to the construction, by foreign forces, of a double status for Indian widows: first, as vulnerable subjects caught in a struggle between obscure religious duties and the progressive forces of reason (re-presentation, *Darstellung*); and second, as specific objects of the law requiring increased, additional protection (representation, *Vertretung*).<sup>61</sup> Through this process, a double-silencing occurred: on the one hand, Indian women were not associated in the adoption of new matrimonial laws by a coalition composed of the imperial power and of ‘progressive’ local elites; on the other hand, the focus on the largely symbolic issue of remarriage left untouched the most pressing concerns of Indian women, namely issues related to their material conditions within and beyond the institution of marriage.

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<sup>61</sup> In times of renewed debate over headscarves and ostentatious religious signs in public spaces, the delicate balancing act attempted by Spivak deserves full mention here: “Between patriarchy and imperialism, subject-constitution and object-formation, the figure of the woman disappears, not into a pristine nothingness, but into a violent shuttling which is the displaced figuration of the ‘third-world woman’ caught between tradition and modernization. [...] To see this [original story of the mythic Sati] as proof of the feminism of classical Hinduism or of Indian culture as goddess-centered and therefore feminist is as ideologically contaminated by nativism or reverse ethnocentrism as it was imperialist to erase the image of the luminous fighting Mother Durga and invest the proper noun Sati with no significance other than the ritual burning of the helpless widow as sacrificial offering who can then be saved. There is no space from which the sexed subaltern subject can speak.” (ibid. 102-103)

### 5.3 Ab-using and learning to learn from below

In her "Aesthetic Education in an Era of Globalization", Spivak specifies her personal stance towards the heritage of the Enlightenment, which is one of "productive undoing [...] look[ing] carefully at the fault lines of the doing, without accusation, without excuse, with a view to use" – or rather, to "ab-use" it, that is: to use it from below, selectively and critically, always bearing in mind the exclusionary effects it carries along (2012: 1-3). To Spivak, the spread of the European Enlightenment, fathered by colonisation, operated as an "enabling violation", one that allowed access to emancipatory contents but rested on the erasure of local cultures and languages<sup>62</sup>, effectively placing the postcolonial subject in the position of the child of a rape.<sup>63</sup> Not unlike Foucault's use of the genealogical method, the postcolonial subject thus ought to retrace the steps of the modern emphasis on rationality in political discourse and to understand it "as produced by the philosophers' methodological need for maxims rather than the unquestioned conviction of the supremacy of reason" (ibid. 16). In contrast to Foucault, however, the purpose of Spivak's productive undoing of the Enlightenment is not to organise the insurrection of subjugated knowledges in the sense of erecting rival, non-Western epistemic/scientific edifices that challenge the dominant 'WASP' edifice. Instead, the solution is the "affirmative sabotage" of the Enlightenment, the subversive appropriation of the classical tools of European modernity – as Spivak is keen on reminding us, "the invention of the telephone by a European upper class male in no way preempts its being put to the use of an anti-imperialist revolution" (Spivak in Alcoff 1991–1992: 115).<sup>64</sup>

For a university teacher such as Spivak, the privileged institutional space to implement, and put to the test, the strategy of ab-using is "in the classroom, where we give accounts of the world beyond" (2012: 196). Using Marx's third thesis on Feuerbach (the recognition "that since the knowledge gap between teacher and taught cannot be circumvented, not to let this develop into a power gap is a constant task that will keep society always in the state of upheaval that is necessary for liberation" – ibid. 7), she establishes a connection between ethical training, epistemological engagement and 'learning to learn'

<sup>62</sup> "British colonialism is an enabling violation. Our point has long been that, in the house of language, we must remember the violation as well as the enablement." (ibid. 315)

<sup>63</sup> "Rape is something about which nothing good can be said. On the other hand, if there is a child, that child cannot be ostracized because it's the child of rape. To an extent, the postcolonial is that." (1994b: 279)

<sup>64</sup> In other words, Spivak would fall prey to the same accusation of self-referentiality formulated by Habermas against Foucault and Derrida.

how to teach in a specific situation<sup>65</sup> – or, in her inimitable prose: “The impossible solution is the infinite unguaranteed patience to learn to learn from below how to teach the subaltern” (ibid. 217). Of particular interest for our purpose in this study is the connection that can be established between Habermas’ communicative reason (collective search for truth via uncoerced argumentation) and Spivak’s conception of teaching as ‘learning to learn to teach from below’ that emphasises “persuasion rather than coercion” (ibid. 348). Thus redefined, pedagogy becomes an effort “to act upon the sensibilities of our students, uncoercively, by their consent”<sup>66</sup> – in other words, an “uncoercive rearrangement of desires” that is the condition of possibility of critique.<sup>67</sup> Here, the parallel with the late Foucault’s ethics of care for the self are striking.

#### 5.4 Critical Summary

Of the three philosophers discussed so far, Spivak is probably the one who garners most praise and universal admiration. The stunning breadth of her erudition would undoubtedly have commanded Foucault’s respect, which was notoriously hard to gain – her “Critique of Postcolonial Reason” starts with a hundred page-long philosophical discussion of “how Kant foreclosed the Aboriginal; how Hegel put the other of Europe in a pattern of normative deviations and how the colonial subject sanitized Hegel; how Marx negotiated difference” (1999: x), then moves on to expose the figurations of postcoloniality in the literary works of Brontë, Shelley, Baudelaire, Kipling, Rhys, Mahasweta and Coetzee, before offering a reformulation/elaboration of her theses from “Can the Subaltern Speak?”

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<sup>65</sup> “Training for the habit of the ethical can only be worked at through attending to the systemic task of epistemological engagement. We “learn to learn” (Bateson’s more general phrase) how to teach from the historico-cultural text within which a certain group of students might be placed.” (Spivak 2012: 9)

<sup>66</sup> “What is to be done here, now, with what we are as agents? I use a working definition of agency: institutionally validated action. At the limit the distinction between subject and agent breaks down, for the coming-into-being of a subject across that founding gap – the programming of the synthesis with the quite-other (which my ancestors, incidentally, located in the synchronicity of the pulmonary system using the air of alterity or *âtman*) – may well be an instituting that keeps us in subjectship. Short of that marginal general moment, present in each thought of agency, we can say, in the narrowest possible sense, that we are validated by the academic institution, in the United States, as teachers of English literature, to act upon the sensibilities of our students, uncoercively, by their consent.” (ibid. 110).

<sup>67</sup> “When I thus assigned myself the agency of response, my institutionally validated agency kicked in. I am a teacher of the humanities. In the humanities classroom, I still believed, begins a training for what may produce a criticism that can possibly engage a public sphere deeply hostile to the mission of the humanities when they are understood as a persistent attempt at an uncoercive rearrangement of desires, through teaching reading. Before I begin, I would like to distinguish this from the stockpiling of apparently political, tediously radical, and often narcissistic descriptions, according to whatever is perceived to be the latest Euro-U.S. theoretical trend, that we bequeath to our students in the name of public criticism. Uncoercive rearrangement of desires, then; the repeated effort in the classroom.” (ibid. 372-373)



as well as an answer to some of the critical comments raised by modernists (most notably Habermas and Jameson) against postmodernism. As a much celebrated translator, commentator and critic of Derrida's work, Spivak has also been at the forefront of cultural critique for over three decades, becoming something of a high priestess for anybody with an interest in (post-)Marxism, feminism, decoloniality or deconstruction. Last but not least, she has also been involved for many long years in patient grassroots work through various rural literacy projects in West-Bengal. To sum up borrowing the words from one of her most caustic critic,

"[t]he relations between North and South are not primarily about discourse, language or identity but about armaments, commodities, exploitation, migrant labour, debt and drugs; and [Spivak's book *Critique of Postcolonial Reason*] boldly addresses the economic realities which too many post-colonial critics culturalise away. [...] If Spivak knows about graphemics, she also knows about the garment industry. It helps, too, that she is among the most coruscatingly intelligent of all contemporary theorists, whose insights can be idiosyncratic but rarely less than original. She has probably done more long-term political good, in pioneering feminist and post-colonial studies within global academia, than almost any of her theoretical colleagues." (Eagleton, 1999)

This being said, I would like to take issue with Spivak's work on three points: her convoluted prose, her theory of the subject and her insistence on positionality. So far as style is concerned, suffice it to say that her prefaces to Derrida's translations are often more challenging reads than the texts they precede – yet without it always being clear to the reader what value such arcane writing adds compared to more straightforward turns of phrase (something, to be entirely fair, I would also reproach Derrida with).<sup>68</sup> Here also, I would thus concur with Eagleton's judgement that Spivak's texts are at times being "pretentiously opaque" and, much more gravely, that her recondite theorising also "comes to stand in metaphorically for what it signifies" thus becoming not just an expression but the very embodiment of an aesthetic, elitist critique that threatens to become "unpleasantly narcissistic when deprived of a political outlet", not to mention a convenient way "of being radical without necessarily being anti-capitalist" – something I have myself argued elsewhere (Rousselin 2014). In addition, Eagleton rightly points that Spivak's style is arguably more quintessential than subversive of the dominant canonical forms of humani-

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<sup>68</sup> For instance, what exactly did Spivak intend when she noted in her preface to "Of Grammatology" that "A written preface provisionally localizes the place where, between reading and reading, book and book, the inter-inscribing of 'reader(s),' 'writer(s),' and language is forever at work"?

ties in Western academia<sup>69</sup> – a point that once more echoes Habermas' charge against the self-referentiality of postmodernism.

The second and third issues that I want to raise – Spivak's theory of the subject and her insistence on positionality – are so intertwined that they are perhaps one single issue after all. Indeed, Spivak in "Can the Subaltern Speak?" does not substantially depart from the standard poststructuralist conception of power as a gigantic subjectivity production machine that microscopically affects individuals, in their psyches and in their bodies, by subjecting them to various disciplinary dispositifs/apparatuses: she brilliantly lays bare the politics of representation – the power games involved in the act of *Darstellung* – and she warns against subjects that are constituted from the outside, whether by formations of power or by the best intentioned critical scholars. Yet, she seems much more pessimistic than Foucault or Deleuze regarding the possibility of de-centred subjects, or of subjectivation-by-desubjectification, given the dependence of subalterns on the images, tools and episteme of the West for both *Darstellung* and *Vertretung*. The picture that emerges is that of a radical distrust towards the individual, Kantian Subject which is reduced to the subjectified and accused of "complicit[y] in the persistent constitution of Other as the Self's shadow" (1994: 75) – a position which I see as going beyond Foucauldian theses (at least if one has in mind the role of spirituality introduced in the ethics of care for the self). The

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<sup>69</sup> "It might just be, of course, that the point of a wretched sentence like 'the in-choate in-fans ab-original para-subject cannot be theorised as functionally completely frozen in a world where teleology is schematised into geo-graphy' is to subvert the bogus transparency of Western Reason. Or it might be that discussing public matters in this hermetically private idiom is more a symptom of that Reason than a solution to it. Like most questions of style, Spivak's obscurantism is not just a question of style. Its duff ear for tone and rhythm, its careless way with verbal texture, its theoretical soundbites ('Derrida has staged the homoeroticity of European philosophy in the left-hand column of Glas'), spring quite as much from the commodified language of the US as they do from some devious attempt to undermine it. [...] The endless digressions and self-interruptions of this study, as it meanders from Kant to Krishna, Schiller to Sati, belong, among other places, to a politically directionless Left. More charitable readers will see this garrulous hotch-potch as a strike at the linear narratives of Enlightenment, by one whose gender and ethnicity these violently exclude. If colonial societies endure what Spivak calls 'a series of interruptions, a repeated tearing of time that cannot be sutured', much the same is true of her own overstuffed, excessively elliptical prose. She herself, unsurprisingly, reads the book's broken-backed structure in just this way, as an iconoclastic departure from 'accepted scholarly or critical practice'. But the ellipses, the heavy-handed jargon, the cavalier assumption that you know what she means, or that if you don't she doesn't much care, are as much the overcodings of an academic coterie as a smack in the face for conventional scholarship. If an abrupt leaping from Jane Eyre to the Asiatic Mode of Production challenges the staid compositional notions of white male scholars, it also has more than a smack of good old American eclecticism about it. In this gaudy, all-licensed supermarket of the mind, any idea can apparently be permuted with any other. What some might call dialectical thinking is for others a pathological inability to stick to the point. The line between post-colonial hybridity and Post-Modern anything-goes-ism is embarrassingly thin." (Eagleton 1999)

Spivakian solution is thus to do without the European Othering Subject altogether<sup>70</sup> and to historicise individuals instead by forcing them to disclose, but also by keeping them firmly confined to, their 'positionality'.<sup>71</sup>

Before delving into the two major problems that I see with Spivak's dismissal of the Subject, I would like to start with one point of agreement and one preliminary remark on the paradoxical character of her insistence on the positionality of agents within the framework of a postmodern approach. First, I am not in principle averse to the idea of positioning individuals with regard to selected systemic coordinates that shed light on their actions. To take a few examples, I am most definitely interested in the 'financial positionality' of researchers investigating the noxiousness of smoking or the veracity of climate change and I also consider that the belief in the 'neutrality' of journalists and, for that matter, in the 'apolitical' character of scientific production are both supreme forms of ideologies – in my opinion, having researchers and journalists alike disclose their normative preferences (or their 'ideological positionality') would bring a number of advantages for the clarity and quality of public debates. This does not mean that I hold these various agents, researchers and journalists, prisoner of their positionality: it is after all conceivable, though practically unlikely, to work under conditions of scrupulous independence and without any feeling of self-censorship while being concomitantly remunerated by the tobacco industry or funded by the Koch brothers. Rather, one could say that the legitimate suspicion of bias can only be lifted by openly disclosing the positionality of these agents, which is why a number of procedures exist in research and media to try and prevent conflicts of interest. This disclosing of 'financial-ideological positionalities' is thus fairly Habermasian in nature: it allows the meritocratic confrontation of views and arguments put forward by agents with different positionalities, with the aim of determining whether the positionality of agents carries any argumentative weight at all. For instance, the results

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<sup>70</sup> See: "The question is how to keep the ethnocentric Subject from establishing itself by selectively defining an Other. This is not a program for the Subject as such; rather, it is a program for the benevolent Western intellectual. For those of us who feel that the 'subject' has a history and that the task of the first-world subject of knowledge in our historical moment is to resist and critique 'recognition' of the Third World through 'assimilation', this specificity is crucial. [...] As a postcolonial scholar, I am not troubled that he does not lead me (as Europeans inevitably seem to do) to the specific path that such a critique makes necessary. It is more important to me that, as a European philosopher, he articulates the European Subject's tendency to constitute the Other as marginal to ethnocentrism and locates that as the problem with all logocentric and therefore also grammatological endeavors (since the main thesis of the chapter is the complicity of the two). Not a general problem but a European problem." (1994: 87-89)

<sup>71</sup> In addition to the last footnote, see for instance: "I am far from averse to learning from the work of Western theorists, though I have learned to insist on marking their positionality as investigating subjects." (ibid. 91-92)

of a study on climate change funded by the Koch brothers can be measured against the results of a study into the same topic conducted by researchers with a different source of funding. And the other way round, one could also argue that the theory of communicative action actually commands that the views and arguments of agents with a different positionality be heard if the intersubjective consensus on truth is to be established. For example, if participation in a practical discourse on the effectiveness of austerity politics is limited to agents who are ideologically positioned within the field of neoliberal economics, the results of that argumentative confrontation cannot be said to meet the Habermasian truth criterion (reaching the rational consensus of all other involved parties). For this criterion to be met, the arguments of participants with a different positionality ought to be pondered. The crux of the matter is that only by openly disclosing their positionality are participants in a practical discourse ever in a position to determine whether all arguments and counter-arguments received due consideration.

While very sympathetic to the call for a greater emphasis on the various structural forces that possibly shape individual preferences, Spivak's insistence on the positionality of agents does not come without a certain irony. Indeed, postmodernism historically emerged against the backdrop of various Marxist, psychoanalytic and structuralist accounts of human behaviour that were viewed as exceedingly rigid, totalising and deterministic, immuring individuals in fixed and universal categories such as social classes. By contrast, postmodern theorists outlined the historically constructed nature of what were previously conceived as universal categories, negated the possibility of a privileged position or Archimedean vantage point from where to generate universally valid knowledge and eventually sought to reinstate various modalities of Difference (complexity, heterogeneity, non-linearity, uncertainty as well as individual processes of decentering, deterritorialisation, desubjectification) against the normalising effects of formations of power. As far as social ontology is concerned, there is therefore something quite paradoxical in the postmodern insistence on positionality, insofar as it deprives individuals of any genuine agency and suggests that their actions merely reflect their position as if, for instance, European theorists were fundamentally unable to make statements that could claim validity for a non-European audience – a view that is arguably more rigid and deterministic than most structuralist accounts. In addition, since the coordinates on the basis of which the position of agents can be determined are ultimately fixed by the formations of power through mechanisms of subjectivity production, Spivak's insistence on positionality effectively amounts to abandoning individuals once and for all in the hands of power structures and to declaring subjectification both unavoidable and insurmountable. Here again, this view is more uncompromisingly deterministic – and I should also say: more pessimis-

tic and more disempowering – than, say, classical Marxism that did envision the possibility of as well as specify the conditions for social transformation.

Let us now come to the two objections that I want to raise against Spivak's line of argument. The first objection is of a dully practical nature and has to do with the empirical difficulty in determining positionality and its effects. Indeed, one needs to specify first, out of the almost infinite array of possible coordinates, which ones truly matter for determining the positionality of agents; second, it is necessary to explain why and how positionality is expected to limit or restrict the validity claims contained in individual speech acts. As far as the first dimension is concerned, I would say that, while not disputing that some form of positionality brings both argumentative clarity and argumentative fairness in public debate, I also consider most coordinates to be irrelevant or trivial. For instance, the insistence on positionality could be invoked to historicise/contextualise in a number of different ways: by reference to a geographical unit as Spivak is inclined to do ('Not a general problem but a European problem') but also by reference to social class ('Not a general problem but a bourgeois problem'), to gender ('Not a general problem but a male problem'), to ethnicity ('Not a general problem but a Black problem'), to sexual preferences ('Not a general problem but a homosexual problem') and why not also to diet ('Not a general problem but a vegan problem'), to generation ('Not a general problem but a sixtyish problem') or to any other personal feature ('Not a general problem but a thwarted left-hander problem'; 'Not a general problem but a Muslim problem'; 'Not a general problem but a divorcee's problem', etc.). The empirical determination of the positionality of agents thus requires a theory of some kind to specify which coordinates are expected to be relevant, and above all why it is so.

Although I do not know of any text in which Spivak offers a precise list of the coordinates she deems relevant, her remark on the positionality of European thinkers suggests that she considers geography to fall into this category. From a methodological standpoint, however, determining the 'Europeanness' of a thinker is more arduous a task than it may seem. What is, indeed, a European thinker – is it somebody born in Europe, educated in Europe or working in Europe? What about non-Europeans working on European issues or with European material? What about Spivak herself, an Indian-born, Columbia-based researcher specialising in European philosophy and literature – does she count as a 'European thinker'? Or is she rather to be 'positioned' as an Indian scholar, a Marxist, a feminist or a deconstructionist? In a way, Spivak seems to herself acknowledge the aporia of the positionality that she so vehemently advocates for others: on the one hand and even though she routinely borrows from the history and cultural productions of India in her

work, "Spivak dislikes being identified as a scholar of India, a label she attributes to 'benevolent racism'" (Smith 2002). On the other hand, she rejects the usual theoretical coordinates that are cast upon her work (Marxist, feminist, postcolonial, etc.) and indicates that she prefers the considerably more socially gratifying (and self-enhancing) position of 'teacher'.<sup>72</sup> While Spivak's comment on her own positionality might be discarded as flagrant double-standard, I think it rather ought to be read against the backdrop of her argument in "Can the Subaltern Speak?" – the insistence on positionality fixes individuals in one configuration of identity from the outside, it somehow immures individuals in one singular feature that is supposedly 'representative' of them; as such it is an act of power, an Othering that paradoxically perpetuates the kind of politics of representation she so eloquently described.

The second dimension of the empirical objection is that, even if positionality could be determined with reference to the relevant coordinates without reproducing the troubling quandary of *Darstellung*, the ways in which positionality affects the communicative process remain very much underdeveloped. In particular, it is unclear whether positionality provides 'background information' allowing listeners to better understand the validity claim contained in a speech act or whether positionality fundamentally defines the perimeter within which speech utterances may have a claim to validity. Stated otherwise, invoking the positionality of European thinkers may be (in a Habermasian sense) an argumentative strategy to increase mutual understanding among participants in a practical discourse to show how a particular position historically took form; but it may also be (in a Foucauldian sense) a genealogical strategy to emphasise the extent to which the argumentative success of one particular position depends upon the concomitant silencing of dissident voices and thus merely has a 'contextual' validity claim. At the risk of overstating the point, speaking of Derrida's positionality as a European thinker may be an effort to retrace the intellectual history of Derridean thought, for instance by identifying the concepts Derrida borrowed as well as the conditions under which these concepts emerged in Europe in the first place. Here, 'Not a general problem but a European problem' can be taken to signify 'a problem that emerges for whoever works with the same analytical categories as Derrida.' Alternatively, the insistence on Derrida's positionality as a European thinker can also be regarded as implying that the validity claim of Derrida's philosophical system could only be established in front of a European audience but would fail to meet the as-

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<sup>72</sup> This permeates through her "Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization". See also her 2009 interview with Oscar Guardiola-Rivera in *Naked Punch*: "I have always had great difficulty casting myself, surely it is others who cast me. I think what I really do is teach. I don't ever have a sense that I do anything other than teach." Available at: <http://www.nakedpunch.com/articles/21>.

sent of non-European participants in a discursive situation. 'Not a general problem but a European problem' here means: 'not a universal problem, but one which solely arises in Europe and ceases to be a problem beyond Europe.' While I can agree with the first understanding of positionality as contextual background information that can serve to foster intersubjective understanding, I think the second understanding, whereby positionality delineates a perimeter within which argumentative claims have 'regional validity', is misguided, in the sense that it keeps individuals chained to their singularities and deprives them of the ability to reach out and experience universal truth – which brings me to my second objection.

The more fundamental objection that can be raised against Spivak's theory of the Subject is precisely that it is not a theory of the subject but rather a theory of the individual. By conflating both notions up to a point where they appear strictly coextensive, Spivak effectively fixes singular human beings as 'positionalised individuals' anchored in their particularities, thereby preventing them from reaching full subjecthood which is characterised by a radical acceptance of universalism. The universal subject is thus constituted against and emerges out of the particular individual, as beautifully epitomised in statements by Saint Paul ("There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" – Galatians 3: 28) or Frantz Fanon ("My black skin is not the wrapping of specific values")<sup>73</sup>. By contrast, the dangers associated with fragmentation, parochialism and a form of narcissism of small differences have been captured in the equally beautiful words of warning attributed to Pastor Martin Niemöller.<sup>74</sup>

For the remainder of this section, I will refer to the work of French philosopher Alain Badiou in order to outline an alternative theory of the constitution of subjects through fidelity to an Event, a sudden appearance in the order of arts, science, politics or love that unexpectedly shatters the everyday coordinates of individuals. Badiou's writing is how-

<sup>73</sup> In "Black Skin, White Masks" (1986: 226-227), Fanon writes: "I am a man, and what I have to recapture is the whole past of the world. I am not responsible solely for the revolt in Santo Domingo. Every time a man has contributed to the victory of the dignity of the spirit, every time a man has said no to an attempt to subjugate his fellows, I have felt solidarity with his act. In no way should I derive my basic purpose from the past of the peoples of color. In no way should I dedicate myself to the revival of an unjustly unrecognized Negro civilization. I will not make myself the man of any past. [...] It was not the black world that laid down my course of conduct. My black skin is not the wrapping of specific values."

<sup>74</sup> "First they came for the Socialists, and I did not speak out—Because I was not a Socialist. Then they came for the Trade Unionists, and I did not speak out—Because I was not a Trade Unionist. Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—Because I was not a Jew. Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me." The quotation is displayed on a number of Holocaust Memorials in the United States.

ever notoriously difficult, in particular due to his predilection for mathematical formalism to discuss ontological issues. His views regarding the distinction between subjects and individuals have been perhaps most clearly expressed in a 2012 interview on the need to defend and renovate the figure of the Master in emancipatory politics, in which he explained that

“[the global crisis of intellectuality], if we want to summarise, is characterised by the attempt to replace the subject by the individual. What is a ‘subject’? It is the human being understood as a network of capacities that allow her/him to think, to create, to share, to act collectively, to go beyond her/his singularities, which is the condition of liberty. Sure enough, the subject is carried by the individual and her/his singularities – a body, an identity, a social position, various drives – but she/he is not limited to it. To be a subject is to circulate between singularity and universality” (Badiou and Roudinesco 2012).<sup>75</sup>

In response to Spivak's sceptical relativism (which could be summed up as: there is no universal truth but only particular truth discourses that are momentarily accepted as valid within specific historical, cultural and geographical contexts, the development of which can be traced and retraced through genealogy or deconstruction), Badiou argues in *Being and Event* that universal truths exist but cannot be unified within the framework of a single metaphysical system. Instead truths are distributed between four “procedures” (arts, science, politics and love) that act as fields over which ‘irreducible singularities’ may occur in the form of an Event: a new pictorial arrangement; an unusual experimental result; a social movement; a romantic encounter. On each of these fields, the Event presents both an interruption of the normal order of knowledge as well as the promise of a novelty if the involved parties acknowledge the Event and decide to live accordingly. The snag is that Badiou's Event is characterised by its undecidability: it is never possible to prove an Event, to scientifically demonstrate its existence. We never “know for sure” that we are in the presence of an Event and the Event can always be negated using the coordinates of the prevailing order of knowledge. Instead, acknowledging an Event as such is always a bet, a hypothesis that ‘something is happening’, something worthy of fidelity – stated otherwise: recognising something as an Event is always a militant, an activist move,

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<sup>75</sup> My translation from the original French: “[La crise globale de l’intellectualité], si l’on veut la résumer, se caractérise par la tentative de remplacer le sujet par l’individu. Qu’est-ce que le ‘sujet’ ? C’est l’être humain compris comme un réseau de capacités qui lui permettent de penser, créer, partager, agir collectivement, aller au-delà de ses singularités, ce qui est la condition de la liberté. Bien sûr, le sujet est porté par l’individu et ses singularités – un corps, une identité, une position sociale, des pulsions – mais ne s’y réduit pas. Être sujet, c’est circuler entre la singularité et l’universalité.”



but it cannot be the product of a rational calculus. Facing a hypothetical event, the question for the affected parties becomes: 'if there is more to what is happening than the usual play of things, what is the consequence for me? How can I rearrange my life in the light of this undecidable Event?' The decision to embrace the Event through fidelity marks the beginning of a truth process.<sup>76</sup>

For Badiou, the subject is the patient work of enquiry guided by the fidelity towards what may be an Event, with the aim of producing a truth that 'punches holes' in instituted knowledges.<sup>77</sup> This truth is eternal in the sense that whoever recognises the Event as such and agrees to live up to its consequences will (re)discover in the past a virtually infinite number of precursory configurations of the same truth – for instance of an emancipated society in the field/procedure of politics (the figure of Spartacus is for instance recurrent in Badiou's writings). These forerunners indicate to the subject that their truth is both historical (it can be traced during specific periods of history) and eternal (it has always existed, and it is constantly being reactivated throughout history). In the second volume of *Being and Event*, Badiou is then interested in the various modes in which the same, universal truth appears in what may be fundamentally different 'worlds'. Of particular interest for our purposes in this study is the concept of subject-body (*corps-sujet*), which is "a mode of appearance in a world determined by a subject that has developed its fidelity to the trace of an event" (Meillassoux, 2010). The subject-body – that may be a single body but is more commonly a collective body such as an arts school, a group of scientists, an army, a party, or a couple – cannot be grasped by reference to the positionality, singularity or idiosyncratic features of the individual(s) that constitute(s) it. Rather, the subject is defined by the devotion to the same truth-procedure (the apparition or bringing into existence of the inexistent) and sustained by the common fidelity to an uncertain Event, as in the climactic scene of Stanley Kubrick's *Spartacus* where the recaptured slaves, despite the

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<sup>76</sup> See for instance: "From which 'decision', then, stems the process of a truth? From the decision to relate henceforth to the situation from the perspective of its eventual [événementiel] supplement. Let us call this a fidelity. To be faithful to an event is to move within the situation that this event has supplemented, by thinking (although all thought is a practice, a putting to the test) the situation 'according to' the event. And this, of course – since the event was excluded by all the regular laws of the situation – compels the subject to invent a new way of being and acting in the situation [...] An eventual fidelity is a real break (both thought and practised) in the specific order within which the event took place (be it political, loving, artistic or scientific). I shall call 'truth' (a truth) the real process of a fidelity to an event: that which this fidelity produces in the situation." (Badiou 2001: 41-42)

<sup>77</sup> See for instance: "I shall call 'subject' the bearer [le support] of a fidelity, the one who bears a process of truth. The subject, therefore, in no way pre-exists the process. He is absolutely non-existent in the situation 'before' the event. We might say that the process of truth induces a subject." (ibid. 43)

promise of leniency if they point to Spartacus, all identify themselves with 'I am Spartacus' (not 'I am a white, male, heterosexual Thracian slave and I support Spartacus').<sup>78</sup>

### 5.5 Bearing on the case

Spivak's writings offer the most far-reaching critique we have encountered so far against the possibility of an asymmetric international cooperation that genuinely empowers the weaker cooperation partner rather than depriving it of the ability to speak for itself. Using her persuasive insights of the politics of representation in colonial settings, the entire Tunisia in Transition project could very well be dismissed as an instance of "white lecturers saving Arab students from Arab professors". Here, Tunisian doctoral students are fixed, through their participation in the project, in a subaltern position and defined from the outside – that is, by the German cooperation partner – as oppressed members of the mid-level university staff (*akademischer Mittelbau*, a category for which there does not even exist a linguistic equivalent in Arabic or French) caught in rigid and outdated hierarchies that impede their meritocratic professional developments and keep them subservient to more senior faculty members, particularly at the professorial level, who rose to positions of power under the dictatorship of Ben Ali (to which they mostly turned a complacently blind eye) at a time when appointment procedures at Tunisian universities were guided by personal connections rather than professional abilities. Thus re-presented (*dargestellt*), Tunisian participants in the project are assumed to be in a position where they cannot voice their concerns themselves, since their position of inferiority and dependence within Tunisian university structures condemns them to silence. It therefore becomes the (self-assigned) role of the German cooperation partner to mediate and articulate these concerns (*vertreten*) vis-à-vis the higher levels of the Tunisian academic hierarchy. And indeed, numerous meetings were organised to that end in the framework of the "Tunisia in Tran-

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<sup>78</sup> Here, Badiou's theory of the constitution of subject-bodies also comes with far-reaching ethical implications, since the 'socialised human animal' (Badiou's name for the individual) is simply not an ethical category. Instead, it is the truth-process itself which is the condition of possibility of Good and Evil: is Evil the failure of the subject to live up to a fidelity. See for instance the appraisal of Badiou's work in Matthews (2012: 127): "Against the radical indeterminacy of postmodernism, Alain Badiou reinstates the philosophical notions of being and truth. He renders the human animal as a subject only insofar as he or she displays fidelity to the event. The event is understood as part of the exceptional realm that stands unnamed and outside of the status quo. As such, fidelity to the event always takes the form of militant radicalism. Truth is understood not as a transcendental absolute or as a verifiable category but as a form of fidelity. The event stands as a break with the existing situation, which offers an ethics based on affirmative principles. However, fidelity can never be certain or proved and it is from this basis that Badiou is able to name evil, not as a pre-existing quantity but solely in relation to the Good. The ethics of the event is predicated upon the subject's rearrangement of previously established knowledge in pursuance of fidelity to the truth-process."

sition" project, both with faculty professors and with senior officials from the Ministry of Higher Education of Scientific Research. It thus looks as if the politics of representation within 'Tunisia in Transition' organises the dispossession and disempowerment of Tunisian students, paradoxically confined to subalterity by the very progressive and good-intentioned forces that are set on helping and emancipating them – a paradox that has reached proverbial status in German (*Das Gegenteil von gut ist gut gemeint*).

Nevertheless, I think this picture is too bleak to be entirely accurate. I see two reasons to be more optimistic regarding the possibility for the Tunisian subaltern to speak in the framework of the cooperation project. The first reason belongs to the order of *Darstellung*: despite the existence of formal requirements and overall strategic objectives on the side of the German funding agency that are undoubtedly conducive to the projection of the German representative consciousness onto the potential cooperation partners, the development of "Tunisia in Transition" was preceded by a number of smaller explorative projects during which the specific needs of the various involved parties were being investigated. To take a concrete example, the joint Letter of Intent of 9 January 2012 initially foresaw measures to increase the employability of graduates and modernise the teaching curricula, along with training activities in the field of university management.<sup>79</sup> The emphasis on research methodologies within "Tunisia in Transition" was not explicitly mentioned in this document and came about progressively at the explicit request of Tunisian students – to use Spivakian language: the Tunisian subaltern was not constructed from the onset and from the outside as the undertrained graduate in dire need of methodological training.

The second cause for optimism belongs to the order of *Vertretung*: although meetings did take place at senior level between Tunisian and German professors and lecturers to discuss the needs of the student body in the absence of student representatives, a real effort was made to associate Tunisian students and let them speak for themselves. In one particular instance, a meeting was organised between German project members, Tunisian participants, Tunisian professors and one representative from the Ministry. After a rather

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<sup>79</sup> The official document is available in German at: [http://www.tunis.diplo.de/contentblob/3394076/Daten/1865902/Downloaddatei\\_Abkommen\\_TP.pdf](http://www.tunis.diplo.de/contentblob/3394076/Daten/1865902/Downloaddatei_Abkommen_TP.pdf) See for instance page 2: „Als ein weiteres Element des Netzwerks werden die tunesischen Ministerien für Bildung und für Hochschulbildung und der Deutsche Akademische Austauschdienst (DAAD) die Beschäftigungsfähigkeit von Hochschulabsolventen unter anderem durch die Modernisierung der Curricula für die schulische und universitäre Lehre, durch die Förderung des ‚career-building‘ für zurückkehrende Alumni, z. B. durch start-up grants und durch ein Sondermodul des CrossCulture-Praktika-Programms stärken. [...] Tunesische und deutsche Universitäten und Forschungseinrichtungen werden ihre Kooperation ausbauen und auf Zukunftsthemen ausrichten, einschließlich Trainingsmaßnahmen im Bereich Hochschulmanagement.“

rapid tour de table, the meeting was 'hijacked' by Tunisian students who very strategically used the presence of German cooperation partners to articulate with great outspokenness and courage their specific needs (in particular the inadequacy of the methodological training, the lack of pedagogical training of university lecturers and professors in Tunisia, and the absence of emphasis on the development of students' reflexive and critical faculties). After this dramatic meeting, a Tunisian student expressed to me her satisfaction at having an opportunity 'to spell out a few home truths for the first time' (*crever l'abcès pour la première fois*) and underscored the absurdity of the fact that the presence of foreigners was needed for Tunisian professors and students to speak frankly to one another.

These two examples nicely illustrate the point made earlier regarding the puzzling tendency of various strands of postmodernism to be even more structuralist than structuralism itself. As far as Tunisia in Transition is concerned, I think it would be both incorrect and condescending to regard Tunisian students as subjectified individuals immured in their subalterity, traversed by flows of power that define them and rob them of the ability to speak out for themselves. Rather, a project such as Tunisia in Transition is evidence that the agency of Tunisian students has to be acknowledged, particularly the extent to which they were able to use the international cooperation project to mitigate deficiencies in the national higher education system through additional training and, more spectacularly, to strategically use the temporary protection enjoyed by the presence of international project partners to express their concerns and advance their interests in relative impunity (relative, since some form of retaliation may have taken place after the departure of the international project partners).

## 6. Conclusion: Asymmetrical international cooperation beyond friendly colonialism

“[...] every universal presents itself not as regularization of the particular or of some differences, but as a singularity subtracted from identitarian predicates.”<sup>80</sup> (Badiou 2004)

Before closing this study, I believe it is appropriate to examine some of the arguments put forward by Uruguayan philosopher Eduardo Gudynas (2015) in a recent opinion piece in which he provocatively argued for the need to break with a form of “friendly colonialism”, understood as the intellectual and theoretical dependence of the Global South on a set of conceptual tools and methodological instruments developed in the North. In many respects, Gudynas offers a kind of concentrated version of Foucauldian and Spivakian theses – in many respects as well, the answer to Gudynas lies somewhere in between Habermas’ critical theory and Badiou’s post-Marxism.<sup>81</sup> The notion of “friendly colonialism” will then provide the yardstick to assess the “Tunisia in Transition” cooperation project and delineate the more general lessons that can be drawn from this project for legitimate international cooperation in asymmetrical settings.

### 6.1 Escaping sterile accusations of Northern versus Bourgeois thinking

The accusation of “friendly colonialism” is directed against a number of scholars and progressive governments in Latin America that draw inspiration from the conceptual work of Marxist geographer David Harvey, a British national based at the City University of New York. Gudynas’ attack can be summed up with two main assertions. First, he argues that it is legitimate to reject a potentially useful set of theories and concepts because they have their origin in the ‘academic North’ and that it is equally legitimate, if not normatively preferable, to work with the indigenous models and local knowledges developed by Latin American scholars. Second, Gudynas contends that Harvey’s Marxist conceptual toolbox, even enriched with the notion of ‘accumulation by dispossession’, may help understand global trends but is however not useful to grasp local developments in Latin America. In the words of Gudynas:

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<sup>80</sup> My translation from the French original version: “[...] *tout universel se présente, non comme réglementation du particulier ou des différences, mais comme singularité soustraite aux prédicats identitaires.*”

<sup>81</sup> The extent to which Badiou’s philosophical system ought to be characterised as ‘Marxist’, ‘Marxian’, ‘post-Marxist’, ‘neo-Marxist’ or even ‘post-Maoist’ is very much a matter of debate. For a major contribution to this debate, see Bosteels (2005).

“this [Harvey] fashion leaves aside the rich history of Latin American reflections and brings us back right into the hands of Northern thought systems [...]. While critiques such as Harvey’s can be shared, they are in any event insufficient for the Latin American reality.”<sup>82</sup>

Both arguments are reminiscent of the postmodern and poststructuralist literature that we have reviewed so far: on the one hand, the appeal to “the rich history of Latin American reflections” echoes Foucault’s plea in favour of an “insurrection of subjugated knowledges”; on the other hand, the analogy between Spivak’s insistence on the positionality of Derrida as a ‘Western theorist’ and Gudynas’ rejection of Harvey’s work as a ‘Northern thought system’ is striking.

Predictably, Gudynas’ charge prompted a furious answer from Harvey’s team in Ecuador. In the tradition of orthodox Marxism, Martínez et al. (2015) defended the universal usefulness of Marxist templates for emancipatory struggles worldwide and pointed not to the geographical but to the class origins of Gudynas’ own conceptual apparatus:

“In this regard, it is important to note that Gudynas’s concept of extractivism is itself based on theories such as the ‘Dutch disease’ and the ‘resource curse’ – theories that find their origin not only in ‘the North’ but above all in neoclassical economics, that is to say in a bourgeois thought system. This is a much more serious problem than geographic origin, while we are referring ourselves to a concept that aspires to be a useful tool in subaltern battles.”<sup>83</sup>

My own position is that the way out of this dialogue of the deaf requires a mixture of Badiou and Habermas. From Badiou and the Hegelian tradition, I take the intuition that the relationship between universality and singularity is dialectical rather than strictly antithetical, that the Universal lies at the core of what presents itself as Singular. One may insist that ‘in some cultures’, people throw rice on the bride and groom on their wedding

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<sup>82</sup> My translation from the Spanish original version: “*La primera, es que esa ‘moda’ [de las repetidas invocaciones al geógrafo inglés David Harvey] deja de lado la rica historia de reflexiones latinoamericanas para volver a dejarnos en manos de pensamientos nortños. La segunda es que si bien pueden compartirse críticas como las de Harvey, de todos modos son insuficientes para la realidad latinoamericana.*”

<sup>83</sup> My translation from the Spanish original version: “*En este respecto, es importante notar que el mismo concepto de ‘extractivismo’ de Gudynas está basado en las teorías de ‘enfermedad holandesa’ y la ‘maldición de los recursos’ – teorías que no solamente son ‘del norte’ sino también de la economía neoclásica, es decir del pensamiento burgués. Este es un problema mucho más grave que su génesis geográfica, cuando estamos refiriéndonos a un concepto que tiene pretensiones de ser una herramienta útil en las luchas subalternas.*”

day whereas ‘in other cultures’, people throw red beans or flower petals – or one may see these various cultural practices as local expressions of the universal human desire for fertility and abundance. In the case at hand, this means that it is largely pointless to oppose Marxist theory and Latin American empirical reality: the Marxist scholar is precisely interested in those features and cultural configurations of capitalism in Latin America that appear most singular and idiosyncratic, not in order to analytically distinguish between hypothetical “varieties of capitalism” but rather to better account for the contextually specific ways in which Capital is able to constantly revolutionise production, increase productivity as well as material wealth while putting an end to former feudal ties – an ability which, incidentally, had already compelled Marx and Engels’ admiration in the Communist Manifesto.

From Habermas, I keep the commitment to discourse ethics as an imperfect but helpful procedure to transform a mere exchange of opinions into an exchange of reasoned arguments duly substantiated and opened to refutation. In the case at hand, it must be possible to organise a confrontation of conceptual models in the order of science between Harvey’s “accumulation by dispossession” (Harvey 2004) and Gudynas’ notion of “neo-extractivism” (Gudynas 2012) with the aim of determining empirically which of the two possesses greatest explanatory power and, more importantly, of fine-tuning both concepts through mutual engagement and critique. This confrontation would be beneficial to both ‘sides’: for instance, Gudynas claims that ecological issues have a greater saliency in Latin America (a proof he sees in the cult of the Peruvian deity *pacha mama*) or that indigenous people in Ecuador and Bolivia have developed specific understandings of value (*sumac kawsay* and *suma qamaña*) that put greater emphasis on non-material wealth and thus substantially diverge from and even challenge orthodox Marxism. If substantiated, these claims would prompt Harvey and other Marxist scholars to dedicate more attention to environmental problems and to alternative theories of value – a reformulation that would not simply be of relevance to Latin American countries but also to the very same countries where Marxism originated.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> Despite having myself argued in favour of eco-socialism as a means to renovate the left through political ecology (Rousselin 2014: 178-182), I nonetheless believe that Gudynas’ rejection of Marxism is insufficiently grounded – for three main reasons. First and though this may be less true of subsequent Marxist scholars, issues such as natural resources, political ecology and environmental protection certainly figure prominently in Marx’s writings, especially in “Capital” – on this point, see for instance Foster (2000) and Hughes (2000). Second, references to *pachamama* in political discourses are mostly vague and tend to become a compulsory rhetoric exercise without programmatic content. As a matter of fact, those political forces that claim inspiration from *pachamama* to advertise their greater sensitivity to ecological issues often behave very much like other pro-growth parties when in government – on

## 6.2 So, at the end of the day, was “Tunisia in Transition” a neo-colonial cooperation project?

Although it may be argued that my own positionality as a white European male and as an adviser, reviewer and lecturer in the framework of this project inevitably colours and perhaps severely impairs my judgement, I would like to sum up the reasons for which I believe that my conclusion – that “Tunisia in Transition” was not a neo-colonial endeavour – may have value beyond my own person and that my arguments may be rationally agreed with, irrespective of my readers’ own positionality.

It is undeniable that the German cooperation partners enjoyed a structural power advantage over their Tunisian counterparts, primarily as a result of differences in material and technological resources (university budgets and staff, particularly the number of research assistants and in-house funding schemes; teaching and research infrastructures, particularly library resources and access to online journals). It is also true that, within “Tunisia in Transition”, these asymmetries grew stronger at the higher levels of the cooperation project: for instance, it has already been said that the definition of strategic objectives was de facto a monopoly of the German funding agency DAAD, with next to no input from the Tunisian side. Yet, the same logic also applies to the German cooperation partners: the universities of Munich and Passau had to act within the scope of the parameters and conditions set the DAAD for the Change by Exchange funding programme. Similarly, the verticality of a number of teaching situations within the project cannot be read as a case of German lecturers imposing their views upon Tunisian students. Though it is true

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this point, see for instance Dangl (2014). Third, Gudynas himself acknowledges “that *suma qamaña* is not found in the everyday life of aymara rural communities, but that the terms were a recent creation, by the aymara sociologist Simón Yampara” (2011: 444). In addition, the same text somehow undermines Gudynas’ pamphlet on ‘friendly colonialism’ since, while Harvey’s positionality as a Northern geographer supposedly limits the validity of his analyses, the scope of *Buen Vivir* is not itself limited by its positionality as an indigenous creation: “*Buen Vivir* is not restricted to indigenous postures. [...] *Buen Vivir* should not be conceived as a position limited to non-Western knowledge, but as useful concept that can support and enhance critical traditions looking for alternatives to development.” Eventually, Gudynas rather begrudgingly admits the obvious overlap between *Buen Vivir* and the good, old-fashioned socialist tradition: “As the *Buen Vivir* moves in a post-capitalist direction, it is common for many people to assume that it is a new type of socialism or that there is a socialist trend towards the *Buen Vivir*. [...] As a platform to explore and build alternatives beyond European modernity, it is moving away from Eurocentric political thought. But, *Buen Vivir* did not imply a complete rupture with those traditions, but a selective adoption of some critical positions rather than others.” When taken together, these last two statements (regarding the transcultural relevance of *Buen Vivir* and the dialectical relationship between Socialism and *Buen Vivir*) offer a much more balanced, though arguably less fashionable, account than the definitive condemnation of Marxism as an instance of “friendly colonialism”.



that the lecturers were mostly Europeans, the group of participants was composed of both Tunisian and German postgraduates, so that German students were just as 'oppressed' as their Tunisian colleagues. Rather than a case of neo-colonialism, "Tunisia in Transition" thus rather begs the question of the power relations inherent in all teaching and learning situations: within the framework of the project, lecturers (whatever their nationality) were indeed placed, despite their best efforts to organise their seminars and workshops as horizontally and participatively as they could, in a position of power vis-à-vis project participants (whatever their nationality). Lastly, I also consider that the standard post-colonial argument, according to which international cooperation all too often occurs on the basis of the template "white men are saving brown women from brown men", does not really hold in the case of "Tunisia in Transition" as it ignores the very real capacity of Tunisian participants to strategically use the project so as to voice their concerns and advance their interests, according to a template that might perhaps more appropriately be labelled "Arab students are using international observers to challenge Arab professors".

This being said, I also believe that a number of opportunities were missed to further legitimise and to seek the assent of the Tunisian cooperation partners in a Habermasian fashion, through discursive engagement and reasoned argumentation opened to refutation. This is particularly true at the level of Tunisian professors. Since the short-term success of the project was not conditional upon their active participation, one may say that the focus on Tunisian *Nachwuchswissenschaftler*/postgraduates was understandable and that it was also justified, given the concomitant existence of other (and better endowed) programmes with a focus on more senior faculty members. Nevertheless, it is also highly unlikely that "Tunisia in Transition" will produce sustainable long-term effects if it is not appropriated and carried forward by the Tunisian university hierarchy once the German cooperation partners have departed.

### 6.3 What does this all mean for international cooperation?

At this stage of our enquiry, three lessons can be drawn that may be of more general relevance for international cooperation in asymmetrical settings.

The first lesson is that the weaker cooperation partner may very well be willing to engage even in the presence of fairly strong power asymmetries. Contrary to what has become standard practice in many areas of international cooperation where expressions such as 'dialogue at eye level', 'cooperation on an equal footing' or 'partnership among equals' flourish even when they have no pertinence, there seems to be no need to artificially insist on the horizontal character of the overall cooperative endeavour. Indeed,

behind the empty rhetoric, such proclamations of non-verticality often allow power relations to play out unnoticed and unhindered – which usually serves the interest of the stronger party. A more demanding strategy is thus to recognise and jointly acknowledge the existence of power asymmetries, precisely in order to design a cooperation architecture that “allows games of power to be played with a minimum of domination” – for instance, via the active search for the consent of the weaker party.

The second lesson is the importance of rational, argumentative engagement in legitimisation processes. Importantly however, this argumentative engagement ought to be distinguished from pedagogy or bargaining. Indeed, the fundamental purpose of Habermasian discourse ethics is not to allow party A to convince party B that what A proposes is right, neither is it to offer B something in exchange for its support to A’s proposal. Rather, discourse ethics lays down a procedure whereby A and B cooperatively define what is right for both of them (as well as for everybody else), by means of an exchange of reasoned arguments and counter-arguments. The impracticability of Habermasian discourse ethics stems from the fact that neither foreign policy nor, for the most part, university teaching qualify as practical discourses guided by “a collective search for the truth”. Instead, both settings are permeated by strategic interests and are therefore the realm of instrumental rather than communicative rationality: diplomats are bound to a set of pre-defined national interests, from which they cannot break away simply because they have heard a convincing counter-argument; and even lecturers design their seminars and workshops strategically to achieve teaching objectives and cover topics laid down in pre-determined academic programmes. This does not, however, mean that Habermasian discourse ethics ought to be thrown overboard – they remain useful as a compass. Working under the assumption that “relations of power are not something bad in themselves, from which one must free one’s self” (Foucault, 1988: 129), the conditions of the ideal speech situation can still serve to define three guiding principles that effectively allow games of power to be played with a minimum of domination (*ibid.*): the ability of the weaker cooperation partner to demand justification; the obligation of the stronger cooperation partner to provide reasoned arguments rather than rely on sheer force; and the possibility for the weaker cooperation partner to refuse a course of action that is insufficiently justified (Rousselin forthcoming).

The third and final lesson concerns what presents itself as a seemingly intractable conflict between universality and singularity – for instance, between the necessity of agreeing to common rules and procedures for the purpose of international cooperation on the one hand and the various calls to respect local identities and safeguard cultural differences on

the other. Using Badiou (and Hegel), we have been able to reject this binary opposition in favour of a more dialectical relationship, whereby individuals are not kept prisoners from their singularities but may reach out and gain access to the Universal by “subtracting their singularity from identitarian predicates”, which constitutes them as full-fledged subjects. To come back to the Tunisian participant with whose playful remark this study began: by remaining firmly entrenched in his ‘identitarian predicate’ as a Tunisian national rather than putting forward the universality of his singular position as ‘one of the oppressed’, this participant actually prevented half of the participants in the project – namely: the German students – from joining in and lending him support in his effort to question the legitimacy of the domination exerted upon him. To a large extent, the same is true at the level of the international system. The cult of positionality and the continuous emphasis on the various identitarian predicates of the oppressed functions as a powerful obstacle to the development of transnational solidarity and genuine international cooperation.

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Official website of the Tunisia in Transition project: <http://tunisia-in-transition.org/>

Official website of the University of Passau (Chair of International Politics) for the Tunisia in Transition project: <http://www.phil.uni-passau.de/internationalepolitik/forschung/tunisia-in-transition/>

Official website of the University of Munich (Institute for Near and Middle Eastern Studies) for the Tunisia in Transition project: [http://www.naher-osten.uni-muenchen.de/forschung/forsch\\_tunesien/index.html](http://www.naher-osten.uni-muenchen.de/forschung/forsch_tunesien/index.html)

Official website of the German Academic Exchange Service for the Change by Exchange programme: <http://www.changebyexchange.de/en/>

Official website of the German Academic Exchange Service including a list of and short reports on ongoing German-Tunisian cooperation projects:  
<https://www.daad.de/miniwebs/ictunis/de/21356/index.html>

Official website of the German-Tunisian Transformation Partnership:  
[http://www.allemagnepartenaire.tn/Fr/accueil\\_46\\_4](http://www.allemagnepartenaire.tn/Fr/accueil_46_4)

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Official website of the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs for the Deauville Partnership: [http://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/EN/Aussenpolitik/GlobaleFragen/G7-G20/Deauville\\_node.html](http://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/EN/Aussenpolitik/GlobaleFragen/G7-G20/Deauville_node.html)

## Annex

### Annex 1: Project description (project website)<sup>85</sup>

#### About the Project

“Tunisia in Transition” is a German-Tunisian research project. It analyses the transformation processes in Tunisia and the Arab world as well as the German and European policies towards North Africa and the Middle East. The project aims to set up an interdisciplinary research group of young academics coming from both shores of the Mediterranean. It provides a platform for collaborative research and offers additional academic training.

Tunisia in Transition consists of two project units which are funded by the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) with support from the Foreign Office in the framework of the German-Tunisian Transformation Partnership:

The Chair of International Politics at the University of Passau (Prof Stahl) administers the research cluster “Tunisia in Transition – International Relations”, thereby also cooperating with the University’s Chair of Journalism. The project runs a research office at La Manouba University.

The research cluster “Tunisia in Transition – Ethnographies of Transition” is administered by the Institute for Near and Middle Eastern Studies at Ludwig Maximilians University in Munich (Prof Kaplony). The project runs a research office at Sousse University.

The following Tunisian partner institutions are involved in the project:

- Faculty of Law and Political Science at the University Tunis-el Manar (FDSPT)
- Faculty of Legal, Political and Social Sciences at the University of Carthage (FSJPST)
- Faculty of Arts and Humanities at the University of La Manouba (FLAH)
- Institute of Press and Communication Sciences at the University of La Manouba (IPSI)
- Institute of Work and Social Studies at the University of Carthage (INTES)

Since 2014:

- Faculty of Law and Political Science of the University of Sousse
- Faculty of the Arts and the Humanities of the University of Sousse

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<sup>85</sup> Source: [http://tunisia-in-transition.org/?page\\_id=6](http://tunisia-in-transition.org/?page_id=6).

## **Annex 2: Project description (University of Passau)<sup>86</sup>**

### **Tunisia in Transition**

The Chair for International Politics at the University of Passau coordinates the international and interdisciplinary research project Tunisia in Transition.

The project aims to set up a German-Tunisian research group, which analyses the transformation of the Arab world and the German and European policies in the MENA-region. Funding is provided by the German Foreign Ministry through the German Academic Exchange Service.

### **Partner institutions**

The following Tunisian partner institutions are involved in the project:

- Faculty of Law and Political Science at the University Tunis-el Manar (FDSPT)
- Faculty of Legal, Political and Social Sciences at the University of Carthage (FSJPST)
- Faculty of Arts and Humanities at the University of La Manouba (FLAH)
- Institute of Press and Communication Sciences at the University of La Manouba (IPSI)
- Institute of Work and Social Studies at the University of Carthage (INTES)
- Faculty of Arts and Humanities at the University of Sousse

On the Tunisian side, the project is coordinated by Salma Besbes and Tasnim Abderahim in Tunis and Dr Ramzi Ben Amara in Sousse. In addition, the Chair of International Politics cooperates closely with the Institute of Near and Middle Eastern Studies at the Ludwig Maximilians University in Munich (Prof Andreas Kaplony). In Passau, the Chair of Journalism is associated with the project (Prof Oliver Hahn).

### **Project Activities**

- Joint Closing Session in Tunis, November 2015.
- German-Tunisian authors' workshop in Passau, October 2015.
- Scientific writing workshop in Tunis, April 2015.
- Methodology workshop in Tunis, February 2015.
- Authors' workshop in Passau, November 2014.
- Coordination Meeting in Tunis, June 2014.
- IR Research and Writing Workshops in Tunis, May 2014.

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<sup>86</sup> Source: <http://www.phil.uni-passau.de/en/internationalepolitik/forschung/tunisia-in-transition/>.

- Joint Workshop in Munich, October 2013.
- Seminar on Methods in the Social Sciences, Tunis, June 2013.
- Visit of the Tunisian ambassador Elyes Ghariani in Passau, May 2013.
- Doctoral colloquium at La Manouba University, Tunis, May 2013.
- Research and Methods seminar in Tunis, March 2013.

### **Annex 3: Project description (University of Munich)<sup>87</sup>**

#### **Tunesien im Wandel**

##### **Deutsch-arabische Transformationspartnerschaft - al Tawasul**

Kooperationsprojekt mit der Universität Passau und den tunesischen Universitäten Tunis-el-Manar, Carthage und La Manouba. Gefördert im Rahmen der deutsch-arabischen Transformationspartnerschaft des Deutschen Akademischen Austausch Dienstes (DAAD) durch Mittel des Auswärtigen Amtes

Die interdisziplinäre deutsch-tunesische Forschungsgruppe „Tunesien im Wandel“ mit den beiden Projekteinheiten Medien und Islam (München) und Governance und Internationale Beziehungen (Passau) erforscht den gegenwärtigen tunesischen Transformationsprozess in seiner politischen, sozio-ökonomischen, kulturellen und internationalen Dimension. Inhaltlich liegt der Schwerpunkt in München auf den Themen „Massenmedien in Tunesien“ sowie der „Entwicklung des politischen Islam“. Hier besteht eine enge Kooperation mit dem Projekt Arabische Massenmedien.

Die Forschungsgruppe beschäftigt sich insbesondere mit der Frage nach der Rolle der Medien in Revolution und Transformation und inwieweit der „der arabische Frühling“ die Medien und die Medienlandschaft in Tunesien verändert hat. Zudem wird ein Archiv über die Berichterstattung der Parlamentswahl 2013 angelegt. Ein weiterer Schwerpunkt liegt auf der Entwicklung der islamischen Parteien und ihre inhaltliche Ausrichtung während des Wahlkampfes im Juni 2013.

Sie soll in der tunesischen Hochschullandschaft strukturbildend wirken und eine beispielgebende Plattform sein, in deren Rahmen insbesondere tunesische Nachwuchswissenschaftler vernetzt und anwendungsorientiert arbeiten können. Neben einer originären

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<sup>87</sup> Source: [http://www.naher-osten.uni-muenchen.de/forschung/forsch\\_tunesien/index.html](http://www.naher-osten.uni-muenchen.de/forschung/forsch_tunesien/index.html).

und für den tunesischen Transformationsprozess relevanten Forschungsleistung soll damit ein Beitrag zur Modernisierung der Hochschulstrukturen in den Geistes- und Sozialwissenschaften geleistet werden.

Die Forschungsgruppe wird von der LMU München (Prof. Dr. Andreas Kaplony, Arabistik und Islamwissenschaft) und der Universität Passau (Prof. Dr. Bernhard Stahl, Internationale Politik) gemeinsam mit den tunesischen Universitäten Tunis-el-Manar, Carthage und La Manouba getragen. Inhaltlich umfasst sie die Kultur-, Politik-, Rechts- und Kommunikationswissenschaften. Die interdisziplinäre Multilateralität auf beiden Seiten dient nicht nur der akademischen Qualität und Originalität des Projekts, sondern befördert vor allem die in Tunesiens Hochschullandschaft so notwendige fächer- und hochschulübergreifende Zusammenarbeit und Vernetzung.

For more detailed information on the project activities (including the programmes of the various seminars and workshops), please contact the author.

## About the author

Mathieu Rousselin is a postdoctoral researcher in the project “From Dialogue to Cooperation” funded by ifa (Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen) in cooperation with the Centre for Global Cooperation Research. In addition, he is also lecturer in political science and international relations at the universities of Duisburg-Essen and Passau in Germany. He holds a PhD in international affairs and political economy from the University of St Gallen in Switzerland and Master’s degrees from the Paris Institute of Political Studies and the College of Europe. His research interests include global environmental governance, social movement theory, critical theory and the study of democratisation processes. Since 2011, he has been involved in a number of cooperation initiatives with Tunisia funded by the German Academic Exchange Service. His research has been published in *New Media and Society*, *Euxeinos*, the *European Foreign Affairs Review*, *Global Dialogues*, *Multitudes*, the *Journal of Environmental Policy and Planning*, *WeltTrends*, *Critique and Science and Society*. He is also the author of *Widerstand (Westfälisches Dampfboot, 2014)*, a book written in German on contemporary critiques of capitalism in France.

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## Can Asymmetrical Cooperation Be Legitimised?

*„It is undeniable that the German cooperation partners enjoyed a structural power advantage over their Tunisian counterparts, primarily as a result of differences in material and technological resources [...]“*

Whether it is ‘dialogue at eye level’, ‘cooperation on an equal footing’ or ‘partnership among equals’ – the vocabulary of international cultural and educational policy suggests that interpersonal and interstate cooperation is legitimate if and only if it is somehow shielded from power relations. For this reason, North-South cooperation is regularly criticised by postcolonial researchers as a form of prolongation of imperial modes of interaction. This research will investigate whether asymmetric cooperation may nonetheless be legitimised if it leads to effective problem-solving and/or generates emancipatory effects. Is genuine horizontality in bilateral and multilateral cooperation ever possible? Can there be such a thing as a non-colonialist foreign cultural and educational policy? Close attention will be paid to the possibility for the weaker cooperation partner to demand and obtain rational justifications from more powerful cooperation partners. This tension will be examined on the basis of a critical and reflexive analysis of the DAAD project “Tunisia in transition”, involving collaboration between German and Tunisian universities.